

Grace and peace to you my friends and fellow sojourners from Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us.

Congratulations. You, we have made it into a new calendar year which means in the last six weeks we have begun two new years – a liturgical and a calendar. Today is the third, that is right – I said third, season of the new, six week old, liturgical year. This new season we begin today is called the Season after Epiphany. Now, I do not know about you but that title to me just screams out the question – **What is Epiphany?** And I am sure that you all know by now that I am going to answer that question.

Epiphany comes from a similar Greek word which has meanings of appearance or manifestation. Epiphany is **actually** a Christian holiday celebrating Jesus' first manifestation to the **world**, to **Gentiles**. It occurs on the twelfth day of Christmas, January 6th. Epiphany is also known as "Three Kings' Day" in some countries. You see, up to now, our Christmas stories of Jesus' birth have all been focused on the coming Messiah to the Israelites. But now the focus begins to shift or at least give an inkling to a broader reason for Jesus to have come, not just for the Israelites but also for the rest of the world, Gentiles like us. The three kings, magi who came from afar were foreigners not Israelites. Epiphany gives us the opportunity to focus on the significance of Jesus' birth and Jesus' role as the savior of humanity not just the Israelites Messiah. The story of the magi is recorded in the second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew which also contains stories of the escape to Egypt, Herrod's massacre of the innocent children, and finally the return of Jesus' family to Nazareth.

JoAnn Post in an article for "Christian Century" wrote about Mary's role in the Epiphany story. She wrote how Mary knew that they would not stay, could not stay. Their departure was not an affront but rather a necessary part of the story. They were to carry the news of Christ the King to their own people, in their own language, in their own way. Mary not only let that happen but she refused to get in the way. Are we able to do the same?

When Mary welcomed the wise ones into her home, Mary opened the door to the whole world. We are invited to do the same: to welcome the stranger to our country, our congregations, and our homes. Are we?

Each of our readings today have either a direct or indirect focus on the following themes: baptism, chaos, creation, Spirit, and water. Part of the reason for these themes is that our readings are really focusing on God, beginnings, and what we might also call new beginnings. For beginners, our first reading from Genesis focusses on God's act of creation. Kathryn Schifferdecker in her commentary on our Genesis reading today says first that there are biblical texts that support the doctrine of creation out of nothing. She then also points out that Genesis 1 is not one of them. In Genesis 1, the world as we know it is created out of formless matter and out of the watery abyss. This is an important concept for us to have in our memories. For lack of a better word, we can describe this as chaos from which God creates all these different things that God then pronounces good. The fourth century church father Ephrem the Syrian described this creation process this way: "The Spirit or Holy Spirit warmed the waters with a kind of vital warmth, even bringing them to a boil through intense heat in order to make them fertile. The action of a hen is similar. It sits on the eggs, making them fertile through the warmth of incubation." The funny thing in this description is that there are other texts that compares God's love to that of a brooding hen. You might think this is an unusual image but it is also compatible with the later Genesis images of those same waters bringing forth life at God's command, teeming with creatures of every sort.

Some years ago, I am not sure exactly when, may be 2020, while serving Table of Grace Lutheran Church in Bethel, Alaska; I had the opportunity to obtain two firsts in my pastoral career. First, was the confirming of two members of that congregation after completing confirmation under my supervision. The second was the baptizing of a teenager prior to her confirmation, this was not my first baptism but my first of a teenager. It was a June ceremony and the plan was to do the baptism in the local river. Spring came late, however, and there were still ice floes in the river and we thought it might be a wee bit chilly. I thought of this event when I read the opening sentence of another "Christian Century" article by JoAnn Post. She said: "It was a cold day on the river – January in Galilee." So, on Friday I asked Google what the average weather was like on January 6th on the Jordan River in Israel. It said the average high is 51 degrees Fahrenheit with an average low of 41. The average wind is 12 mph and the average rainfall is just over 4.5 inches. Certainly not as cold as in Bethel but certainly not temperature conditions like here in Maui.

When you read this text, do you understand that Jesus is not the only one John is baptizing? In fact, JoAnn Post describes it as if John were working on an assembly line, John dips and raises, dips and raises. Can you imagine how much consternation there was among the people when the process slowed down and was may be even delayed because of Jesus' baptism. Sinless Jesus being just another anonymous baptism in a local river at the hands of a local preacher. John and Jesus, and certainly God knew but no one else did.

Stephen Hultgren in his commentary on our gospel reading points out two things for our knowledge. First, this short text has three sections: the appearance of John in the wilderness, then John's preaching, and finally Jesus' baptism. The second thing is that Mark's account of Jesus' baptism, like his gospel as a whole, has an air of secrecy. In Matthew, God's declaration about Jesus reads like a public announcement – this is – to John and the gathered crowds. Yet, in Mark, God's declaration is portrayed as a private transaction between God and Jesus – you are. The luxury in these portrayals is that we can choose the perspective that best meets our own perspective.

Hear then the good news:

Baptism like creation is simply a new beginning.

This concept is similar to Jesus' telling Nicodemus, "**You must be born again.**"

In his Small Catechism, Martin Luther said: "*It is not the water that does these things, but the Word of God which is in and with the water, and faith which trusts this Word of God in the water. For without the Word of God the water is simply water, and no baptism; but with the Word of God it is a baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit.*"

The God who called forth life from the primordial waters is the same God who calls us to new birth in the waters of baptism.

Ephrem the Syrian said it this way: "Here, then, the Holy Spirit foreshadows the sacrament of holy baptism prefiguring its arrival, so that the waters made fertile by the hovering of that same divine Spirit might give birth to the children of God.

How do we know this is true – because we know that God came, comes to us in Jesus.

We emerge from the water with a new identity and a new purpose.

Jesus' baptism reminds us that Jesus is not only our Lord, but also our sibling.

Grace and peace to you my friends. In baptism you were recreated and made new. You were made a child of God, an heir to the Kingdom.

Amen