

## Sermon | First Sunday after the Epiphany | The Baptism of our Lord

Mark 1:4-11 | The Rev. Barnabas Pusnur | January 7, 2024

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A very happy new year to all of you!

This Sunday is special! What a privilege to worship God together this first Sunday of 2024. What a joy to start the first Sunday in the fellowship of the children of God.

May this entire year be defined by our love for God and our love for one another. May this year we see God's power, grace and love manifesting in our lives, in the lives of our fellow beings, in our cities, and in our world.

In the church calendar we have just entered the season of Epiphany. The word 'Epiphany' means manifestations or appearances. In the season of Christmas, we celebrated the joy of arrival of God as human in Jesus. In the season of Epiphany, we journey along the events in Jesus' life where Jesus' identity as the savior is manifested. Events where the people around Jesus have an aha moment. Where they notice that this Jesus, though fully human, is no ordinary human.

The church marks this journey of Epiphany, these aha moments with the arrival of the Magi to see Jesus. Yesterday, January 6, was the feast of the Epiphany, the beginning of the season. And on the feast of the Epiphany, we think about this special unexpected visit from men from far East. A star shone in the sky and these magi who were some kind of astrologers noticed and understood that it meant the birth of a king, of someone special. So, they journeyed to visit this king.

Unlike usual portrayals of the nativity scene, the magi don't seem to have arrived on the night of Jesus' birth. Sorry to disappoint you with that! But the Gospel accounts show them as looking at the star and journeying and inquiring about a child who was already born. King Herod is disturbed by the magi's looking for the birth of a king, and when he finds out the exact time when the star appeared he estimates that this child must be under 2 years.

In any case, when the magi come to where Jesus was, they have an epiphany moment. The scripture says they were overwhelmed with joy. They enter the house, they see the child with Mary his mother, they kneel down and pay Jesus homage. And then they give Jesus gifts.

For the next six Sundays until the beginning of Lent, we will be exploring these events of epiphany in Jesus' life.

In today's gospel reading when Jesus is baptized the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit descends like a dove on him. And a voice comes from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Many were going to John the Baptist for baptism. John was proclaiming the coming of the kingdom. He was the voice of the one preparing the way of God's salvation. It was a renewal movement. A movement where people were invited to repent and be prepared for God's salvation to break through. Many responded to John the Baptist's call. They were eager to be part of this renewal

movement. They were eager to mend their ways and be ready for God.

One fine day, Jesus walks up to John to be baptized. Matthew's gospel says, "John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he consented."

John, and for that matter we don't completely understand why Jesus wanted to be baptized. Was it to identify with and walk with the people in their journey of longing for God's salvation? Was it to fulfill some understanding of righteousness in the Jewish law? One could speculate different reasons why a sinless Jesus needed a baptism of repentance from John.

But what one should not miss is the narrative climax to which this event leads. The baptism of Jesus becomes an opportunity for an epiphany moment to result. As he comes up from the water, the heavens open up and God's Spirit like a dove descends on him. An aha moment for all who witnessed it. This is something spectacular. This baptism is not ordinary. The Spirit descending on him—this Jesus is special. This was an epiphany!

But there was more to it!

A voice is heard: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

What can be a greater manifestation of God, of Jesus being the savior, than hearing this voice. One

hears God speaking! A spectacular moment in itself. And then you hear God attesting that Jesus is the Son of God.

Those who witnessed this, including John the Baptist had an aha moment. A moment where God becomes real and present. A moment where one's eyes are opened to a reality which one was oblivious to. A moment which has such an impact that it is transformative.

The magi were overwhelmed with joy and knelt, paid homage, and offered precious gifts. John the Baptist's eyes were opened to who the savior was. In fourth gospel, John the Baptist says, "I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Chosen One."

As we start this year, and as we worship together as God's children Sunday after Sunday this year, may God manifest God's presence, power, love, and healing, in and around us.

May like the magi and the Baptist, we open ourselves to the epiphany of Jesus in our lives. May this year, the epiphany of God, the encounters with God transform us and make us whole.

Have a blessed year! Amen.