

Evensong  
January 8, 2012  
The Rev. Canon David W. Lovelace

For many the feast of the Epiphany holds little meaning. The Christmas season that begins on December 25 comes to a fitting conclusion twelve days later on January 6 when we celebrate Epiphany with the arrival of the magi. In many parts of the world this is the day for gift giving as we recall the gifts brought to the Christ Child by the men who traveled from the East following a star. For many this is a time to strip trees of their finery, remove the pine and holly boughs and put away the nativity set away for another year. The last day of Christmas gives us one last chance to listen to our favorite Christmas carols, wear that reindeer sweater one more time and enjoy the twinkling lights. In some way this feast seems to just be added on by the Church to drag out Christmas just a little longer, delaying our return to Ordinary time. So, we hear this evening not of a baby in a manger rather of an adult who seeks out John the Baptizer on the banks of the Jordan River and goes down into the cleansing water identifying himself with the rest of the human race.

Mark introduces us to Jesus through the activity of John. John was a prophet who preached and baptized in the Judean wilderness. He proved to be so popular that Herod Antipas found it necessary to arrest and execute John. Mark tells us that John was a preacher who called people to repentance and who baptized those who responded to his call. John's baptism is characterized as a rite of "repentance for the forgiveness of sin."

"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." What was Jesus thinking as he entered the water with penitent sinners? We do not hear as we do in Matthew's account, John suggesting that he needs to be baptized by Jesus rather than John baptizing Jesus. Instead Mark tells us Jesus goes down into the water with those who heard John's call for repentance and renewal.

Karl Barth referred to Jesus' baptism as a "summary of the essence of the gospel." The astounding epiphany, dramatized by the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove," lies in the revelation that God is no longer hidden but becomes incarnate in the person of Jesus. All we need to know about God is now knowable in Jesus. Lamar Williamson says that while the epiphany establishes firmly Jesus identity as the Son of God, it also establishes our identity as God's adoptive sons and daughters.

Jesus baptism reveals how deeply he identifies with us – how he crossed the sea out of slavery, how he entered the Promised Land. How he accepted the heritage that was his and is ours. How Jesus shared in our hopes for God’s kingdom to reside on this earth as it is in heaven.

In our own baptism we are part of the same heritage and filled with the same hope as those who have followed Jesus down through the centuries. In the manifestation of Jesus as the Son of God we are challenged not to just be spiritual bystanders but to connect the dots for our own lives. In our baptism we are invited to gaze upward and hear the words we all long to hear – “You are my beloved in whom I am well pleased.”

Mark in telling this story challenges us with the promise that we are blessed with the gift of the Spirit and anointed as God’s sons and daughters. This text is a blessed assurance but also a mandate – we are live our lives as blessed children of God. Baptism, my friends, is where the rubber meets the road. We have been incorporated into the story of God’s people. We have been anointed to share the good news which means it is show and tell time among our family, our friends and in our neighborhood.

We have crossed the desert with the wandering people freed from slavery and promised a new beginning. We have been to the manger with the shepherds and the three kings. What do we say about who we are and what we are part of? The collect for today sums the answer up in these words...“Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made and boldly confess Jesus as Lord and Savior.” There is no greater commission for those who are baptized in Jesus’ name.

Amen