

Baptism of Jesus

What does it mean that we are in Epiphany? We understand most of the church seasons. We know Lent is about repentance, turning around. We know Advent is preparing for the Christ Child's birth. So what is Epiphany?

We are told that the identity of Jesus is manifested to us. Manifested?

The word suggests a list of what is held in a cargo; it reveals what is held in the hold of the ship or in the truck, or in the package. The manifest of my shipment from Staples contains copy paper, Pilot pens, a 2008 calendar.

What does Epiphany manifest (reveal) about Jesus of Nazareth?

Last week the manifest agent was a star. The star hung over the stable where infant Jesus lay in a manger. The star revealed to the Wise Men from the east just where they could find the baby. And not just his location but his cosmic significance. This infant was special, the star said.

Today the "manifestor", the revealer, is the dove of the holy spirit that descended on Jesus as he came out of the baptismal waters of the Jordan. We will come back in a moment to this our gospel of today.

Next week John the Baptist reveals Jesus as the Lamb, the lamb of God, suggesting both his gentleness and his destiny as a sacrificial lamb. And Jesus invites those who are looking at him in a questioning way, "Come follow me and I will show you how to fish for people."

Finally, on the last Sunday in Epiphany season we ascend the mountain with Jesus, James, John and Peter and Jesus is revealed to us once more as the Son of God, God who speaks from the cloud as Jesus appears transfigured, as surrounded by light, and we with the disciples are both fearful and filled with joy.

This is Epiphany in a brief sketch: from the star to the dove to the lamb to the transfiguring on the mountain Jesus is revealed to us, manifested to us, as messiah and Son.

Back to today and John the Baptist, the Jordan River, Jesus and the voice of God. I must confess as a preacher of some 30 years give or take that I come to the baptism text with a sigh. What do I have to say that is new, or, if not new at least fresh and insightful?

I read commentaries, check out old articles of Sojourners on line
and meditate, cogitate and sort out what comes from within.
Today I'm indebted to Fritz West
a United Church of Christ pastor in Wisconsin.

Fritz West writes that John the Baptist could not see beyond sin.
"He thought it could be obliterated- by the judgment of God
and the end of the world- but not overcome.
Therefore sin and judgment were central
to his understanding of baptism."

West contrasts John's baptism of repentance in order to save oneself from the wrath of God,
contrasts this to the baptism which we experience in the name of Christ.
West says that ours doesn't anticipate a wrathful end, "it celebrates a new beginning".

The image of the dove descending on Jesus tells us that this is a new beginning,
a new creation...we are created anew in the Holy Spirit through Jesus, our brother.

You will remember in the creation story in Genesis I
the Spirit of God hovered over the waters of chaos,
hovered much as a bird hovers.
Picture an osprey hovering over a pool in the Wind River.

Picture a raven riding the wind currents over the red hills.

In Genesis this hovering Spirit brings a new creation into being,
brings a world into being out of chaos and disorder.

So West writes that in Christian baptism we, too, have a new beginning,
"the initiation of the days when' my Son, the Beloved will faithfully bring forth
justice (as we heard today in the Isaiah reading),
not as an earthly king, but tenderly, without even raising his voice".

John's followers continued on in the baptism of John, the baptism of "repent or else",
the baptism that protects against the wrath of God,
while Jesus taught about grace, the grace of a loving God
who pronounces the whole creation "good"...including us.

This doesn't mean we are without sin!
Far from it! All of us fall into sinful actions and thoughts
motivated by ambition and our need to be successful.
All of us hurt others sometimes unconsciously
because we are driven by our own egos.
But God never gives up on us!

I'm remembering my grandson, Andy, when he was nine or ten.
He wanted to be baptized, and, for some reason
I ended up doing the baptism counseling, the preparation.

We had a little book supplied by the diocese.
It had drawings of people with cartoon balloons for dialog,
good illustrations for children.
Good, I say, until we came to the words in the baptismal service:
"Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness...?"
Suddenly Andy looked stricken.
"Does that mean that I'm bad?" he said beginning to tear up.
Never have I been so horrified at the power of words, the power of religious words.
No, I said. You are good, the very best of boys.
And went on to explain and soften the words.

Fritz West should have been there to help me out, to say in words a child could fathom
what he writes about today's gospel.
Referring to John the Baptist's emphasis on judgment
and God's wrath about sin
West says that "Jesus' followers are of a different sort.
They believe that the fundamental reality of the world is grace, not sin.
In baptism by grace the power of sin and death is broken
...we have a choice to choose sin or grace, life or death,
a blessing or a curse. This is a new beginning. "

I may have said something adequate to Andy.
I hope so, because despite being thoroughly human
Andy is also thoroughly good.

So Jesus sinks under the waters of the Jordan and rises up wet and dripping.
He submits with humility to John's baptism of repentance.

But as he looks up into the sky a voice whispers in his heart.
He feels loved and claimed as Son.
He feels empowered to do what he may have been contemplating
for some time: that is to preach a message of grace.

We regularly give up on the world, don't we?
We see the carnage in Iraq and in Pakistan.
The TV screen shows us tornado damage and floods and tsunamis.
We shake our heads at corruption in governments, all governments, including our own.
We cringe when the political candidates
vilify each other and wound their opponents.

Is this the new creation that the baptism of Jesus and our own baptism brought about?

Karl Barth, the great Swiss theologian asked us to start each day with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other. Yes, all the bad things in the newspaper (and we 21st century people might add : on television, too), all these signs of a broken world are real.

Never-the-less, Barth says, God does not desert us. Yes, the politicians are trying to destroy each other but never-the-less God does work through politicians. The church on occasion fails us yet never-the-less the church, the Body of Christ is our mother.

Now an adult Andy, I hope understands the full meaning of the baptismal service: that we are invited to “turn to Christ and follow him,” that we are invited to “put our whole trust in his grace and love.” This baptismal prayer sums it all up:
 “...that all who are baptized into the death of the Son may live in the power of his resurrection and look for him to come again in glory.”

To this we add our hope that all the diverse religions of the world will in time sense and live out God’s grace and love.

For as Peter declared in his preaching read today, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality”. Amen

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January 13, 2008

Epiphany I Year A :

Isaiah 42: 1-9
Acts 10:34-38
Matthew 3: 13-17