



Ben Blobaum's Sermon

SUNDAY, JANUARY 8, 2023

FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY/BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

On Friday, the worldwide church celebrated one of the most important days in the church's liturgical calendar, the Feast of the Epiphany, which marks the 12th and final day of the season of Christmas and the beginning of the season of Epiphany, which will take us all the way to Lent. Epiphany is one of the earliest of the major feast days in the history of the church and even pre-dates the formal designation of Christmas on December 25. Today, Epiphany retains eminent importance in the life of the church, even if it has become much less well known to many churchgoers.

The word *epiphany* means "manifestation," and in the church's context it means specifically, "the manifestation of God." In other words, the Feast of Epiphany celebrates God's self-revelation, God's immediate and direct disclosure of himself to the world.

In the Western tradition of the church – of which we are a part – the celebration of Epiphany incorporates three events that constitute a threefold revelation, or threefold "epiphany," of the divinity of Christ: 1) the visit of the Gentile Magi, or wise men, who followed the star of God to pay homage to the newborn King of Israel; 2) the baptism of Jesus; 3) the wedding at Cana, at which Jesus turned water into wine. In John's Gospel, the turning of water into wine is the "first of Jesus' signs," by which he "manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him."

The Feast of Epiphany celebrates these three events because each one uniquely reveals to the rest of the world the divinity of Christ that was first made known to Mary and Joseph and the house of Israel. And precisely by revealing Christ's divinity, these three events disclose, or "manifest," the true identity of Jesus Christ – that he is the incarnate [Son of God, who is the full and final self-revelation of God to the world.](#)

My sermon today will focus on the second of these three events, the Baptism of our Lord. John the Baptist, as you may recall from our readings in Advent, had been called and sent by God to prepare the way of the Lord; that is, to prepare the hearts and minds of the people of Israel to recognize and receive the arrival of God's promised Messiah. And John did so through a baptism of repentance in the Jordan River, by which he called the people to turn from their wicked ways and return to the Lord their God.

At the start of Jesus' public ministry, when he was about thirty years old, Jesus came to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. But John, knowing Jesus to be the One whose coming he was sent to prepare, protests, humbly asserting that, surely, this is backwards, that John is utterly unworthy of such a thing and that it is therefore not Jesus who ought to be baptized by him, but that he is the one in *desperate* need of baptism from Jesus. Jesus reassures John, however, that it is fitting for him to submit to John's baptism of repentance, explaining that this must be done "to fulfill all righteousness." And so, in obedience to Jesus, John consents and baptizes him.

It would be easy, and perhaps tempting, to conclude that what this exchange between Jesus and John teaches us is that if you feel unworthy of something, but Jesus says you are worthy of it, then you are worthy of it. After all, prior to Jesus coming to him at the Jordan, John had testified that he was not even worthy to carry Jesus's sandals, but now Jesus himself is authorizing John to do something *infinitely* more significant than sandal-carrying. So, we might conclude that Jesus has changed or elevated John's worthiness.

But that is *not at all* what's happening here. On the contrary, the change in worthiness that's taking place here is not with John, but entirely with Jesus. In his submission to baptism from John, Jesus is not elevating John's worthiness, but rather emptying himself of his own worthiness before God, that he might assume the utter unworthiness of the whole sinful world. Wading into the waters of the Jordan River, Jesus waded into the sin of the whole corrupted human race, to identify himself completely with sinners.

Mother Teresa, with whom most, if not all, of you are familiar, devoted her life to serving the sick and the poor in the slums of Calcutta, India. Those dearest to her heart were the destitute children of the orphanage she established. Monetary donations poured in from around the world. But Mother Teresa turned all the money over to the orphanage and clinics and remained herself poor. In 1994, then-President Bill Clinton and his wife Hillary invited Mother Teresa to the White House. Maybe some of you know this story. Over lunch together, Hillary was praising Mother Teresa for her self-sacrificial life of service to the poor, and she made the comment, "I wouldn't do what you do for a million dollars." To which Mother Teresa replied, "neither would I."

So intimately did Mother Teresa identify herself with the poor, that she lived with them *as one of them*. In a similar, yet infinitely more profound way, that is what's happening at Jesus's baptism: the eternally begotten Son of God, having come in human flesh to dwell with us, at his baptism freely chooses to identify himself intimately and completely as one of us sinners.

For, recall that John's ministry was a baptism of repentance for sin. But Jesus is absolutely sinless. So, what need does he have for a baptism of repentance? The answer is: none whatsoever. By submitting to John's baptism of repentance, Jesus, the sinless One, identifies himself completely with sinners and is saying to God the Father, "let your judgment fall on me as the only sinful one." John's baptism of Jesus, then, was indeed a baptism of repentance, but not of Jesus' sins, but of ours – yours and mine. And so, Jesus comes to John for baptism, not because Jesus has any sin for which he must repent, but rather, as Jesus explains, "to fulfill all righteousness."

This presents a question that begs to be answered: what does it mean to fulfill all righteousness? How is all righteousness fulfilled? All righteousness is fulfilled by the making of righteous persons out of unrighteous ones. And it is in the cross of Christ, through the unsurpassable power, mercy, and self-giving love of God, that all righteousness is fulfilled. For in the self-surrender of the Son of God, who exchanged *his* place and *his* righteousness before God and took our place and our unrighteousness instead. On the cross, Jesus died both for us and *as us*.

The writer of Psalm 103 rejoices that "[God] has not dealt with us according to our sins." Jesus is the way that God does not deal with us according to our sins. For, beginning at his baptism and carried all the way to the cross, Jesus takes our sin upon him as his own.

God does not deal with us according to our sins, because, on the cross, God the Father dealt with *Jesus* according to our sins. On the cross, Jesus took our place and our unrighteousness, so that, rising from the dead on the third day, we might receive *his* place and *his* righteousness before God the Father. Jesus died for us and as us, that we might live with him and in him.

And it was at his baptism that Jesus freely and humbly identified himself with us and committed himself completely to fulfilling the mission for which he was sent, to do the will of his Father, which would take him all the way to the cross. In other words, Jesus's baptism inaugurates his road to the cross; it's where Jesus goes "all in," and from that point forward, there is no going back. There is only the cross, through which all righteousness would finally be fulfilled. At the decisive moment of Christ's commitment in baptism, the heavens – the very dwelling of God – are opened, and the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus and God the Father speaks, revealing to all people and to all principalities and powers, "this is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

And so, the Feast of Epiphany celebrates Jesus's baptism because it is there that God reveals to the world what Paul, in our New Testament lesson for today, refers to as "the mystery of Christ...the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things" (Eph. 3:4 & 9). It is the mystery Incarnation of the Son of God, and so, it is the mystery of the gospel. It is also, then, the mystery of *our* baptism.

Baptism inserts sinners into the once-for-all death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and unites us to his very Person. To be united to Christ means that we are made one with him. And so, united to Christ in Baptism, his righteousness becomes ours, and we stand in *his* very place in his relationship with God the Father. The all-embracing love and favor of God the Father for his Son from all eternity is the very all-embracing love and favor that the Father has for us. And so indeed, Paul exclaims, that through our faith we have access to approach the very throne of God in boldness and confidence.

This is the meaning of Epiphany. For what was previously hidden in God from the foundation of the world has now been revealed and made manifest once and for all. Jesus Christ, the eternally begotten and incarnate Son of God, is the full and final self-revelation of God to the world. There is no other plan for humanity that God is hiding behind a curtain. The gospel, "the mystery of Christ" is God's "plan A," and there is *no* "plan B."

Through "the mystery of Christ" – the gospel of our salvation – God makes righteous persons out of unrighteous ones. And by his sheer gift of grace in Christ, God the Father says to each one – to you and to me – "you are my daughter, you are my son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Amen.