

Sunday, January 10, 2021
First Sunday after the Epiphany/Baptism of Our Lord (Year B)

Mark 1.4-7

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/201641524950199>

(Sermon begins at about 10:45)

“Breaking Through”

Liturgically speaking, we are in an extended celebration of the Epiphany that began last Sunday and wraps up today. The term Epiphany comes from the Greek, meaning “manifestation” or “appearing.” Now, strictly speaking, the Feast of the Epiphany is only one day—January 6th, which was this past Wednesday. Historically, the Feast of the Epiphany included the celebration of three events, all of which were “firsts”: the visit of the Magi, Jesus’ baptism, and Jesus’ first recorded miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana. These three events were celebrated together as each one revealed a significant truth about who Jesus was and is. In more modern times, the celebration of these firsts and of what they reveal about Jesus are broken up to focus on each individual event. The coming of the Magi is the focus of the Feast of the Epiphany, although we included it in our celebration of the Second Sunday after Christmas, last Sunday. Our lectionary now has the baptism of Jesus as a separate focus on the Sunday after the Epiphany. And the miracle of the wedding at Cana is relegated to a lesser position, only being remembered once every three years on the Second Sunday after the Epiphany in Year C of our lectionary. We’ll get that Gospel on January 16th of next year. So, as you can see, the way things fell out this year, this week, beginning last Sunday and ending today, has essentially been a week-long celebration of various aspects of the Epiphany.

Now, for the sake of clarification, while we are focusing on the original images associated with Epiphany, that does not mean this is the only time we deal with the subject of Epiphany. Between now and Lent, in the period known as the season after Epiphany or Epiphanytide, all our Gospel readings contain some element of Epiphany—of how Jesus is continually being revealed to the world as the Son of God.

Brother Keith Nelson of the Society of St. John the Evangelist notes that “The season of Epiphany celebrates the gradual, yet exhilarating revelation of God’s light and truth in the world.”¹ While the season of Epiphany may celebrate the gradual revelation of God’s light and truth, that is hardly what happens in today’s Gospel reading. Quite the contrary. What we witness today is more of a “breaking through.” The description of Jesus’ actual baptism is characterized in this way: “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’ (Mk 1.9-11). The traditional meaning of Epiphany as “manifestation” or “appearing” certainly sounds gradual. Sort of passive. Like it just kind of slowly, gently unfolding. But the image of “the heavens torn apart” feels more like a “breaking through” with energy, even with explosive force. Like something that was pent up that needed releasing. Which, when you think about it, is essentially what happened.

What we celebrate from Christmas through today is one “breaking through” after another. At Christmas we celebrate Jesus’ birth—God breaking through in human form. At the Epiphany we celebrate how Jesus is revealed to the world as the Son of God in a dramatic way through the worshipful presence of the Magi and their giving of extravagant gifts. And then our celebration today of Jesus’ baptism, where God breaks through and proclaims in no uncertain terms through the descending of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove and in the words, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” All these events were about God breaking into our lives in ways that had never happened before. This was Emmanuel—God with us—breaking into our human existence. This was God-in-the-flesh breaking through to be with us in human form. To be in relationship with us in a more direct and personal way than had ever been possible before. So yes, this was certainly a breaking through with a vengeance.

That said, let’s focus on Jesus’ baptism, since that is what today is about. While we’ve talked about it before, it always bears repeating. The baptism of Jesus always begs the question, why did Jesus need to be baptized? Particularly if he is the Son of God. After all, we are told that what John was doing was “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mk 1.4). As the Son of God, as God in the flesh, there was no need for Jesus to repent, to seek forgiveness of sins. So why go to all that effort to travel out to the middle of nowhere to the River Jordan to be baptized? Was it all just for show?

Well, yes. But not in a negative way. Jesus’ being baptized was not “just for show” in that it was meaningless. Quite the contrary. The action of Jesus being baptized spoke volumes. For in seeking to be baptized, for seeking repentance even though there was nothing to repent of, Jesus was demonstrating solidarity with humanity. He was saying that he was indeed one of us. And as such, he was willing to engage in and experience the fullness of what we experience. Including being humble enough to seek forgiveness—whether it was needed or not. In so doing, he was effectively submitting himself to the same laws and requirements as we live by.

But there was even more to this sign of solidarity. For solidarity, true solidarity, is a two-way street. It was not just about Jesus seeking to identify with us. It was also about Jesus inviting us to identify with him. Epiphany is about Jesus’ true identity being revealed. In what happens at his baptism as this identity is breaking through for all the world to see, he is also inviting us into his identity. Not that we are divine as he is. But that we are beloved children of the Divine, with all the rights and benefits that go with it. Certainly, this side of the Resurrection, we recognize and understand the broader implications of this. How through his death and Resurrection, Christ has obtained for us forgiveness of our sins. He has obtained for us eternal salvation. He has obtained for us eternal life in his kingdom. And while he has done all of this without us having to ask, while he has done all of this as a gift freely given to humanity, all he asks is that we formally accept the gifts offered. Appropriately, the sign of our acceptance is the very sign that was used to reveal his identity in the first place: baptism. The definitive revelation of Jesus as the Son of God occurred as he came out of the waters of baptism, with the sign of the Spirit and the words of God: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” So, too, for us as we make the conscious decision to accept what Christ offers, which is sacramentally symbolized in our own baptism. Where we rise out of the waters of baptism, cleansed, forgiven, restored, made members of the Body of Christ.

As I said, we are beloved children of the Divine, with all the rights and benefits that go with it. And with all the responsibility. In that action of accepting our place as members of the Body of Christ, we agree to take on all that is of value to Christ. We agree to abide by his laws and commandments. Particularly those to love God and to love our neighbors. We agree to live out those values. Just as Jesus' true identity is revealed at Epiphany and particularly through his baptism, so too, is our true identity as members of the Body of Christ revealed through our baptisms. As one commentary notes, "Jesus, the one whom God is about to call 'Beloved,' gets in line with the rest of us. It's an expression of the astonishing humility and solidarity of the Incarnation: in Jesus, God comes alongside us, even to the point of joining us in a rite of repentance and renewal. Following a teacher like this would mean setting out with him on a path of humility and solidarity, confession and grace, a way of love with which God is 'well pleased.'"²

That said, the irony should not be lost on any of us that here in the week where we celebrate the fullness of Jesus' identity made known to us, and how we take on that identity through our own lives of faith, our nation witnessed one of the most egregious attacks against our common life in the history of our nation. An attack that was not from a foreign power, as when the British attacked the Capitol building in the War of 1812. Nor like the 9-11 attacks by Al-Qaeda. This was an attack by our fellow citizens against the heart of our national government. A violent attack against democracy itself. An attack that was prompted and encouraged by delusional fantasies rather than accepting established facts. An attempted coup that was based on everything that is completely opposite of the Christian values this nation was supposedly founded upon and which many of those perpetrating the attack so proudly claim they believe in. An insurrection that was based on hate instead of love. Based on ego instead of humility. Based on petty self-interest instead of the selfless pursuit of the common good. Based on lies instead of truth. Based on darkness instead of light.

What happened on Wednesday was the complete antithesis of what that day, the Feast of the Epiphany, is supposed to be about. Granted, it was not timed to coincide with Epiphany, but for those of us who place our identity in the one who is revealed this season, the events of Epiphany 2021 should be a wake-up call. In them we should recognize the fragility of our so-called Christian society. One that has disintegrated into clinging to differences in political ideologies over the Christian values given lip-service to by our governmental leaders and those who support them. Oh, that we would fight to perpetuate our religious values with the same passion and energy that some of our fellow citizens fight to hang on to political ideology. If we lived our religious values the way some live their political values, think of what we could accomplish.

The Feast of the Epiphany, and this week surrounding it, are not just about Jesus' identity being revealed. It is also about our own identity being revealed. Our identity as the Body of Christ. And what it means to live that identity in very real ways. The events of this past week reveal some fundamental flaws, some growing cracks, in our societal systems and structures. Our identity as members of the Body of Christ requires that we respond. I'm not talking about responding tit-for-tat or in like manner. But to discern how we can up our game and manifest our identity as members of the Body of Christ in word and action, in ways that just might bring

about some needed changes in our society. Maybe not at the upper levels, but certainly in our own little corners of the world. In ways that can have a ripple effect. To allow our identity—our true identity—to break through. Our identity as Christians is all about working to make a difference in a broken and hurting world. To work to bring about much-needed healing. To work to help bring about the Kingdom of God in this place. And while that work may at times seem futile, it is necessary. And we can be assured that when we do endeavor to live into our true identity in word and action, God is right there proclaiming to each of us, “You are my Son. You are my Daughter. You are my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

¹ Brother Keith Nelson, SSJE, “Brother, Give Us A Word” email, January 8, 2021.

² Elizabeth Myer, “Showing Forth: SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Epiphany and Jesus’ Baptism,” SALT, January 3, 2021. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/1/2/showing-forth-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-and-jesus-baptism>.