

Sunday, January 8, 2023
First Sunday after the Epiphany – Baptism of Our Lord
Matthew 3.13-17

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/828151911584609>

(Sermon begins at about 19:55)

“The Elements of Epiphany”

As of this past Friday, January 6th, we entered a new liturgical season: Epiphanytide—the season beginning with the Feast of the Epiphany and continuing through to Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. At least, that is our Anglican definition of Epiphanytide. Other denominations have chosen different ending points. And some liturgy geeks, including some of my colleagues, have even argued that Epiphany should be treated as separate from the season after Epiphany. Be that as it may, at least we can all agree that there is something special about Epiphany and what it represents—regardless of how that may be treated in the days and weeks following January 6th. And while today is the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord, one of the key commemorations of Epiphany or the season after Epiphany, depending on your perspective, I would like to focus on the broader meaning of this thing called Epiphany—be it a day or a season.

A good overview of what Epiphany is about is contained in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, a compendium of the various commemorations and saint’s days on the liturgical calendar of The Episcopal Church:

The name “Epiphany” is derived from a Greek word meaning “manifestation” or “appearing.” Anglican Prayer Books interpret the word with an alternative title, “The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.” The last phrase, of course, is a reference to the story of the Magi from the East.

A Christian observance on January 6 is found as early as the end of the second century in Egypt. The feast combined commemorations of three events that were considered manifestations of the Incarnate Lord: the visit of the Magi, led by the star of Bethlehem; the Baptism of Jesus in the waters of the Jordan River; and Jesus’ first recorded miracle, the changing of water into wine at the wedding of Cana.

Epiphany is still the primary Feast of the Incarnation in Eastern churches, and the three-fold emphasis is still prominent. In the West, however, including Anglican churches, the story of the Magi has tended to overshadow the other two events. Modern lectionary reform, reflected in the 1979 Prayer Book, has recovered the primitive trilogy by setting the event of the Baptism as the theme of the First Sunday after the Epiphany in all three years, and by providing the story of the Miracle at Cana as the Gospel for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany in Year C.¹

The fact that our celebration of the Epiphany, of the manifestation of Jesus as the Incarnate Son of God in our midst, encompasses three particular events says something about the breadth and extent of what this day and this season signifies. Let's briefly look at each event before moving on to a synthesis of what this means for us in our lives of faith.

First is the coming of the Magi from the East. As we are told in the second chapter of Matthew's Gospel, wise men from the East observed a magnificent star that they interpreted as literally pointing the way to the birth of the King of the Jews. They follow the star to Bethlehem and find the baby Jesus, whereupon they bestow gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. There is a great deal of symbolism in the tradition of the Magi and in the gifts themselves. First the gifts. Gold, a symbol of wealth and power, signifying that this child would be a great king. Frankincense, with incense used in various worship practices and representing the lifting up of prayers to God, signifying the divine nature of this child. And myrrh, an ointment traditionally used in the ancient Near East as part of healing practices, as well as burial preparations, signifying the sacrificial death this child would face, as well as the healing salvation his death would provide to the world.

While the gifts are meant to signify just who this child was and who he would become as King of the Jews, the representation of the Magi themselves is equally significant. While the Bible does not specifically say there were three of them, tradition has settled on that number, most likely because of the number of gifts. While from the East—the area we now know as Iran—the Magi are traditionally represented as being white, black, and Asian. Representing the extent of the known world at the time: white representing Europe, black representing Africa, and Asian representing Asia. A symbolic representation that this child initially hailed as King of the Jews was not just King of the Jews, but also King of the Gentiles. That this child was the king and the savior for all nations, of all people.

The second event in the Epiphany triad is the Baptism of Our Lord, which we commemorate on the first Sunday after the Feast of Epiphany—which we celebrate today. As we heard in our Gospel reading, Jesus, now an adult, goes to the River Jordan to be baptized by John. The actual manifestation of Jesus as God Incarnate comes at the end, where we hear that “just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’” Affirmation by Godself that this was indeed God's Son come among us. The ultimate affirmation, the ultimate manifestation, of Jesus as God Incarnate.

Of course, probably the biggest question in this event is just why Jesus needed—or rather wanted—to be baptized. After all, the Gospels tell us that John's baptism was a baptism for the repentance of sins. If Jesus is God Incarnate, how could he have sins that need forgiving? That's actually an easy one. He didn't need to be forgiven, didn't need to be baptized, but he was baptized to demonstrate humble solidarity and love for those he came to save. To be in solidarity and to demonstrate his love for us. Another form of manifestation of Jesus as God Incarnate among us, with us, and for us, securing for each of us our place as members of the Body of Christ.

And the third event in the Epiphany triad is the miracle of the changing of water into wine at the wedding at Cana. This is the first recorded miracle that Jesus performed near the beginning of his public ministry, at least in John's Gospel. Symbolizing the miraculous nature of Jesus' ministry, which could only be attributable to God Incarnate. The miracle, changing 180 gallons of water into wine, is also a sign of the great abundance of love that God and Jesus have for us.

So that, in a nutshell, is a summary of the three events, the three elements, traditionally incorporated into the celebration of Epiphany, of the manifestation of Jesus as God Incarnate, as God with us. And something of what these elements are meant to convey to us about who Jesus is as God Incarnate. In terms of how he is revealed to us as God Incarnate, but also of what that means for us as those who follow him as the Body of Christ.

That is quite a bit of symbolism and meaning to take in. Maybe that's why we end of breaking it up into pieces in our liturgical commemorations: the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6th, the Baptism of Our Lord on the following Sunday, and our once-every-three-year look at the Wedding at Cana. But I think there is still more to be considered. The more personal aspect that comes through our own embodiment of Epiphany. A realization that has developed over the course of my time as a priest.

I was actually ordained to the priesthood on the Feast of the Epiphany, January 6, 2007—16 years ago. Prior to my ordination, Epiphany was, of course, a special liturgical day. But with my ordination, it took on a deeply personal meaning. A meaning and an understanding that has continued to develop and grow as I have developed and grown as a priest. But it is not just an understanding that applies to me as one ordained to the priesthood, or that only applies to those who are called and ordained as clergy. It is an understanding of Epiphany that applies to each and every one of us as members of the Body of Christ.

I have come to recognize a fourth element to those traditionally associated with Epiphany. That there is yet one more way in which Jesus is manifested as God Incarnate, as the Son of God. And that is through us. Through our lives. Through our words and our actions. As members of the Body of Christ, we are called to outwardly manifest who Jesus is for us in our day-to-day lives. We, of course, know this. It's part of the vows that we take in our baptisms—vows that we will renew in just a couple of moments. That we “continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.” That we “persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever [we] fall into sin, [we do our best to] repent and return to the Lord.” That we “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.” That we “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself.” That we “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.” While we don't use the language, each and every one of these vows, made first at our baptisms and renewed multiple times each liturgical year, are Epiphany promises. To seek to live into the fullness of who God has created and calls us to be, as his beloved children, as members of the Body of Christ. That as his Body in the world, we are the ones who proclaim the truth of who Jesus is as God Incarnate.

Epiphany is about the various ways Christ is manifest as the Son of God in and to the world. Through the message of the Magi, through his baptism in the River Jordan, and through the

teachings, healings, and miracles of his public ministry. As the Body of Christ, we recognize that the Epiphany did not end with events some 2,000 years ago. We recognize that the Epiphany is not just a day, not just a season, but is a way of life. The Epiphany continues even now. In our own time, we are modern-day Magi, pointing the way to Christ as the King of all nations. The one who loves us so much that, even though he didn't need to, he goes into the waters of baptism in solidarity with us. The one who rises out of the waters of baptism along side us, welcoming us into the promise of eternal life with him, as we all hear God proclaim, "you are my Child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

¹ *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2018* (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2019), 30.