

Passing Through Waters

Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3:18-22

Last Thursday sources close to me said, “On the radio all I hear is January 6 and the capitol, January 6 and the capitol. How about talking just once about January 6 being Epiphany?” Not to minimize the importance of remembering the attack on the capitol, but as a preacher I could not help but agree. Epiphany, the twelfth day of Christmas, is a celebration of Jesus Christ's incarnation, of his revelation to the world as the son of God. According to the Westminster Dictionary of Worship, Christians celebrated Epiphany for centuries before they did Christmas. It is the earliest documented of *any* Christian observance. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, Epiphany has always served as a commemoration of both Jesus' birth, and of his baptism. Today's passage from Luke gives us a good way to look more deeply into that. But first, here is today's brief summary of this sermon: Jesus' baptism revealed his identity.

The word epiphany means “manifestation” or “revelation”. In Greek it refers to any Aha! moment. The baptism of Jesus was one the greatest Aha! moments of all time. Luke tells the story more briefly than do the other three Gospels. In fact, Luke dispatches with the whole of John the Baptist's ministry much more quickly as well. For Luke, the Baptist's sole purpose is to point to Jesus as the Messiah promised by the prophets. Sort of a, “You had one job to do” mentality. Once he has done his job, Luke no longer finds him important to the narrative. In our first three verses Luke tells

us John did a lot of preaching and got locked up for calling out Herod's various sins.

Luke then writes, "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened..." Luke may have known the oral traditions used by Mark and Matthew to give us the actual words Jesus prayed, but again he seems to want to get to the point. (The point being that Jesus has now been revealed as the Messiah.) Luke presses on to prove it. "The heaven was opened," he writes. In Greek this phrase literally reads, "the realm of the gods rent itself open." To put it another way, the skies split. In a dramatic, flashy way, the screen that usually shields us from seeing the glory of God got out of the way. A writer of Luke's talent means every word he writes. Here, he means that God has set the stage for a highly dramatic moment.

Now, "the Holy Spirit descended on (Jesus) in bodily form, as a dove." In the New Testament world doves symbolized purity and beauty. In addition, the Jews knew doves as the divinely ordained sacrificial offering for interpersonal sins, sins such as gossip and slander. For John the Baptist and his fellow Jews witnessing the appearance of this dove, it would immediately hint at the eternal, perfect, omnipotent nature of whoever it is. But the icing on the cake comes next. Using the formal second person that signifies respect, a voice intones, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased." Now these people have all the clues they need to understand what has happened. This Jesus has just been visited by the holy God of Israel, who has stated before them as witnesses that Jesus is divine, a manifestation of God on

earth, the long-promised Messiah. Jesus' baptism revealed his identity.

Orchard Park Presbyterian Church in Carmel, the congregation to which our daughter and her family belong, does baptisms well. They have a beautiful font, nicely decorated with a mosaic of colored stones. The pastors follow the same tradition I learned in seminary, taking the newly baptized children on a walk through the congregation, introducing this new brother or sister up close and personal. But perhaps my favorite part of their baptism practice is that each child baptized receives a banner made especially for him or her. They display it across the front of the font, then send it home with the family. At the top of the banner you see a shell with water dripping down. Then you see the baptized child's first name, followed by these words: "I have called you by name. You are mine. Isaiah 43:1." The same God who called Jesus "my beloved son" knows all our names. *We are God's.*

Isaiah's prophetic ministry took place in the years leading up to the end of the enslavement and exile of the Jews. The Assyrian Empire in the north had already crumbled following decades of a three-way civil war. Its southern-most province, which would become the Babylonian Empire, succeeded and annexed a great deal of territory, including Judah in which Isaiah lived. But now here came the Persians, from modern-day Iran, with far more advanced war technology, like gunpowder and leveraged engines that could throw heavy boulders up to a quarter mile. Scholars believe our chapter from Isaiah was written just as word of near-certain Persian victory over Babylon reaches Jerusalem.

The Persians had a deserved reputation for liberality when it came to the treatment of their vassal states, like Judah. The Jews *wanted* Persian victory. Too tiny to achieve freedom on their own, they believed the progressive Persians would offer them the nearest thing to it. As usual, the prophet Isaiah sees these world events as the workings of the one God. When he writes, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you," he means that he sees the Persians' victory as God's way of delivering the Jews from slavery. The symbolic vision continues with, "When you pass through the waters I will be with you." The traditional interpretation that this refers to the Exodus experience of some 500 years earlier is probably correct. And passing through waters likely belongs in a pairing with the following, "when you walk through fire," a possible reference to Moses' encounter with the holy God in the burning bush. Together these images suggest deliverance. Israel and Judah have endured defeat, slavery and exile into foreign lands. Now they seem poised to enter more blessed years.

The passing through waters also brings us back to baptism. Old Testament Jews did not have any rite that resembled baptism. Indeed, they used fire, not water for the sacrifice of animals to atone for their sins. But in the hundred or so years before the birth of Jesus, the Jews started adopting the widespread Middle Eastern custom of using water in a rite of symbolic cleansing. Many cultures conducted river ceremonies involving splashing water over the head or even throwing it from ewers on one another. John the Baptist may have adapted these rites, adding the theological theme of repentance. The thought probably was that getting baptized meant embarking on a new life, in which one turned away from past sins and toward a new

determination to obey God's law.

Jesus' baptism revealed his identity. He did not need forgiveness for sins he had not committed. He did not need to repent. He did not need symbolic washing. But by accepting John's baptism, a baptism of repentance, Jesus signaled his whole reason for entering this world: to take our place on the cross. To pay the price we owed for our sins. To reveal God's love to a doubting world. To provide one of the biggest Aha! moments in all of history. Reading this story should give us an epiphany: truly he *is* the son of God, God's self in human form. Part of the Trinity represented by that dove and that voice.

Epiphany celebrations take different forms in different traditions. Some Russian Orthodox believers do a kind of polar bear club swim in icy water. And for various reasons they do this on January 19. Most Greek Orthodox unwrap their Christmas presents on January 6. Many American Christians observe Epiphany the same way they do every other high holy day: by going to the all-you-can-eat cafeteria. (Wait, I made up that last one.) Last Thursday was a day with the oldest of Christian connections, the first holy day observed by followers of Jesus, the day on which we recall his baptism and the Aha! moment it provided: the revelation to the whole world that Jesus has always been, and always will be, God.

For years, I bought into the idea that Epiphany was tied to the Magi, that this was the day on which they arrived to visit the boy Jesus in Mary and Joseph's house.

In this telling Epiphany becomes the day to celebrate Jesus' revelation to the Gentiles (as the Magi were not Jews). But none of the Gospels tell that particular story. To be clear, none of the them calls the day of his baptism Epiphany either. But the themes of Epiphany and baptism dovetail (if you will excuse the pun). Both tell us that Jesus came into the world as the long-promised Messiah who would free all who believe in him as the son of God from sin and death. Jesus' baptism revealed his identity.

Lil Thompson's Steakhouse in Nashville, Tennessee used to hold weekly Elvis impersonation contests. In town to make a recording, Elvis heard about it, walked into the place after the house lights went down, and sat in the back. After the first several acts finished he came forward to take his turn. He sang Love Me Tender, received polite applause, and finished third. He had already had six songs hit number one in the charts but nobody in the place recognized him—except for Wayne Thompson, the owner, who, with Elvis' permission, gave the story to the Nashville Tennessean newspaper. The biggest pop star of the day, a man women screamed over, went unrecognized doing his own material.

Let us guard that we do not get so familiar with Jesus we stop seeing him for who he is. His baptism revealed his identity. He is the son of God who takes away the sins of the world—including ours. Let us pass through those waters with joy.