

## EPIPHANY I – 2021

I sometimes wonder how the theologians decide which parts of a gospel to include and which portions to leave out on any given Sunday.

For some reason, today's gospel reading from Mark omits the first three verses of the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter. This omission is an unfortunate one, because their omission blurs the significance of what Mark is all about. Unlike the other Gospel writers, Mark gets right to the point -- no genealogy, as in Matthew, no lead-up to the birth as in Luke, and no poetic images, as in John. The omitted first words of Mark are, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," and then moves right into the promise of Isaiah of a "voice calling in the Wilderness." Only then does he write the words we hear today, describing the appearance of John the Baptist in the wilderness for the baptism of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

The significance of this three verses should not be lost on us.

"For starters, it is no accident that Mark's Gospel doesn't make it past the first two sentences without quoting the Hebrew Bible—in particular, Isaiah."<sup>2</sup>

Mark knew the Jewish scriptures well. The story he tells of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is not told as a new story about God and God's people, "but rather as a pivotal moment in the larger story of God making Godself known in human history. The God we meet in Jesus, Mark tells us, is the same God spoken of in the Hebrew scriptures, who is

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to The Rev. Dr. Marshall Jolly, writing in Sermons that Work for the theme of this sermon.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

doing a new thing. . . [and] Mark makes clear from the first words of his Gospel that this is only, “The *beginning* of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”<sup>3</sup>

***Only the beginning.***

For us and for the world, that is the true significance of the Epiphany. It’s like a big red **X** on the map of history. Jesus’ ministry begins *here*.

For a long time, the Feast of the Epiphany was *the* Christian winter feast. Long before the Church co-opted the celebration of the winter solstice, and made it Christmas, Christians celebrated the feast of the Epiphany, because it celebrated the fact that Jesus was not just kept a secret for the Jews of Palestine but was made known to the rest of the world as well, assuring the salvation of all of us. In our tradition, we tend to give Epiphany short shrift, which is too bad, because the Christmas Incarnation of God as Man would have little meaning to the world as a whole if the salvation he brought had been limited to the Jews.

In my mind, the Epiphany and Holy Baptism are inextricably linked; not just because the Epiphany marks the Baptism of Jesus, but because of what Baptism means to us. So, I’d like to spend some time this morning talking about epiphany and baptism – *our* epiphany and *our* baptism, both as individuals and as a congregation. As Webster’s Dictionary tells us, Epiphany has several, related meanings. I prefer the third definition, “*a sudden, intuitive perception of or insight into reality or the essential meaning of something . . .*”

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

I like this definition because it speaks to how my heart and mind react to this appearance of God in my life.

Initially, baptism was conferred on adults or on entire families when the parents became Christians. Later, baptism came to be performed at infancy in order to “protect” the child in case he or she died before adulthood. There was a belief or superstition that something bad would happen to a child in the afterlife if the child died before baptism occurred. Although most theologians have dismissed this concept, we still tend to baptize young children. There are also vestiges of social implications. For some parents, it’s simply “getting the baby done”, a semi-religious, social occasion. Part of me resents the social motivation, particularly when it appears to be the *only* motivation. I’ve baptized too many infants, never to see them or their parents in church again.

I’ve even been tempted to refuse baptism to parents who have magically appeared on the scene, either for the first time, or after a very long-time, as I tend to be cynical about whether they will support the child in continuing with the community in worship.

However, hope springs eternal, and I’ve always relented. I do so for two main reasons: I’m always hopeful that the parents will listen to their own vows without their fingers crossed and decide to join with their child and support the child in his or her Christian growth. The other reason is because of a more accurate definition of baptism. Baptism is the rite of Christian initiation – when a person, whether adult or child, formally becomes part of a worshipping Christian community. In most Christian traditions, it opens

the way to Communion – the Holy Eucharist; that special gift of God to remind us and strengthen us in our spiritual life.

Whatever else we might debate about Jesus' baptism; we know that the Spirit of God descended on Jesus at his Baptism; and we know that Jesus' earthly ministry did not begin until he received it. It is the same for us as Christians. No matter how sinless was Jesus, and how sinful are we, we share this baptism, not only with one another, but with Jesus himself. Jesus Baptism was not an end; it was a beginning. **Our Baptism was not an end either**; it is the **beginning** of our ministry! This is where the big red **X** is written in our lives. Our ministry begins here!

When an adult is baptized, it is often as the result of a spiritual epiphany -- a point when he or she finally “gets it”. With water and Chrism, the newly baptized person is “sealed by the Holy Sprit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own for ever.” When a child is baptized, we make everyone in the congregation – **not just the sponsors** – responsible for the Christian growth and nurturing of that child. Just because the parents may not pay attention to their commitment, doesn’t get the rest of us off the hook. When we join in the baptismal covenant, responding “yes” to this question, “Will you support this child . . .” we take on a responsibility to pray for and support that child, so that he or she, in turn, may one day have a spiritual epiphany, – so that he or she may finally “get it.”

I would suppose that we can say that spiritual Epiphany would be the Anglican equivalent of being “born again.” Nevertheless, true spiritual epiphany may not come until

many years after baptism. For that matter, I would suppose that the Christian journey should have many, many epiphanies. As we see one aspect of Christ more clearly, we are driven to discover others.

When we baptize a child, our work is not done. We dedicate that child to the Christian community, and we dedicate ourselves to the growing up of that child that he or she may have a more abundant life in Christ. When we allow ourselves to be baptized, that is not the end, it is just the beginning. We dedicate ourselves, to teach, to worship together, and to pray. We dedicate ourselves to resisting evil and to repentance when we fail. We dedicate ourselves to proclamation of the Gospel to others, and to seek and serve Christ in all persons, as well as striving for justice and respecting the dignity of every human being.

Hopefully, one can say to the newly baptized, “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet; if you think you’ve had an epiphany now, wait until Cursillo; wait until you’ve studied the Bible a few years; wait until you take EFM; wait until you’ve served someone else; wait until you’ve seen the face of Jesus in the soup kitchen. Although you may go for a while in a dry spell, don’t give up. There’s a new epiphany just around the corner. Just remember your promises, remember that you are dedicated to God and to bringing the Good News to your whole world. You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

At St. Timothy’s, we acknowledged, many years ago, that ministry is not simply the work of the clergy. In response to the question, “Who are the ministers of the Church”, our catechism replies, “The ministers of the Church are *lay persons*, bishops, priests, and

deacons.” It is not an accident that “lay persons” are listed first. The clergy come second. In football parlance, the clergy are the coaches, the trainers, and the team doctors. The lay people are the *players*. Neither the coaches, the trainers, nor the team doctors can get the ball across the goal line. It takes quarterbacks, guards, tackles, and receivers to get that job done.

As we enter a new year, with our fervent hope and prayers that the distraction of the Covid pandemic will soon be behind us, I pray that we will rededicate ourselves to more than being ministered to, but to be ministers to others. My prayer for us all, is that there will be many new epiphanies leading St. Timothy’s to manifest God to each other and to the world outside these walls. We have each had our own epiphanies so that we might bring about the manifestation of Jesus Christ to those who have not yet seen him. I pray that during this next year we will always keep in mind the fact that, at baptism, we were dedicated to the celebration of God in our midst and in the world around us. Finally, my prayer is that, as we turn our focus outside ourselves and toward our friends and neighbors, that we can say to one another, and to the world outside these walls, “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet!”

Amen. So be it. Let it be done.