

The Rev. Heidi Truax, Vicar

Happy Epiphany, everyone! In most churches and certainly in all businesses, the Christmas decorations have already come down. Some were put away on December 26th. But here we have them still. No, we are not lazy. They are here for a reason. Well, maybe more than one reason. First of all, since we did not have a celebration of Epiphany on the actual feast day, January 6th, I wanted to take this Sunday to recognize the celebration of the coming of the Magi to visit, honor and bring gifts to the baby Jesus. As Nicholas Porter said in his sermon on Friday evening, there isn't much that we really know about the coming of the Magi from far away except what Matthew tells us in his Gospel. Much of what we have today are the traditions that have built up over the centuries. But the symbolism is clear enough; wise men from far away came to honor God come down from Heaven. Heaven has opened and God has drawn near. It is the first instance of the Gentile mission of the Christian faith because men from a different country and different beliefs came to worship the newborn Jesus. So, it was lovely this morning to have our young people bring the kings to the crèche as our final honoring of this year of the story of the birth of Jesus. After this service we will put away the beautiful crèche until next Advent.

And the candles in the aisles? You may ask why they are still up. Well, we wanted them to be here when the Bishop came on Friday evening. They give such a lovely light in the church.

Epiphany is, after all, known as the season of light! It strikes me as a funny thing that it is just as the season of light arrives we all take down our Christmas lights, we take the lights out of the windows of our houses, we put away the candles and settle in for a dark and dreary January. It just gives me a chuckle to think about how our traditions vie to cancel each other out.

But today our Gospel reading from Luke mentions nothing about the Magi, and their journey to Jesus. There is nothing about the star over the place where Jesus was born. Instead we heard about the Baptism of Jesus. We go from the birth of Jesus to the baptism of the Jesus in a very short time. You might say 0 to 30 in 14 days! And, that is why our hangings are still white today. The Baptism of our Lord is one of the church's major feast days, and so we are still white, following Christmas and the Feast of the Epiphany.

So some big questions come to mind. Why do we celebrate Jesus' baptism following right on the heels of celebrating his birth? And why does the Baptism of Jesus fall in the season of Epiphany? And, one other perplexing question while we're at it....why does Jesus have to be baptized anyway? I have asked these questions in the past, and so perhaps you have had these questions on your mind too.

Those brave souls who came to church last Sunday in the snowstorm got a chance to hear the one story in the New Testament that we have about Jesus as a teenager. But, the most important time for us in the life of Jesus is when he begins his ministry as a grown man. His baptism by John the Baptist in the Jordan River is the beginning of that ministry.

That is why we hear of the baptism of Jesus before anything else happens to him. And that is the reason that the baptism occurs in the beginning of Epiphany. I'll talk more about Epiphany in the Sundays to come, but suffice it to say that the word is from the Greek word that means to manifest or make an appearance. At the baptism of Jesus, God appears. Our text says, "the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him." It is an epiphany!

There are numerous passages in the Bible that speak about heaven being opened; when manna rained down on the Israelites in the wilderness, when Jacob saw a ladder descending from heaven, when Jesus talks to his disciples about the future and how they will see heaven opened. "You will see greater things than these, Jesus promises them." These are times when God seems very near us. If we bring our whole selves, our souls and bodies to these occasions,

we may sense God's presence. Also, what does Luke say that Jesus did, right before heaven was opened? Jesus prayed. For Luke, it is important for us to know that it is in times of prayer, we might say quiet meditation, that heaven will be opened and God will be very near us. So, just as Epiphany is the season of light and revelation, the baptism of Jesus was a time of revelation and the coming of God, the Holy Spirit, the sustainer of light and life.

The third question I asked was why does Jesus have to be baptized by John? This delves into that mystery of Jesus having inextricably, and mysteriously, two natures. Jesus was a man and so, of course he would be baptized with all the other people who came to John and his ministry by the Jordan River. But we have learned that Jesus was a very different man. Paul puts it like this: For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. **Hebrews 4:15** Jesus was very much like us, but he was also the Son of God. He was one who didn't live a life of confusion as you and I experience, and as Paul says so eloquently in his letter to the Romans (I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. **Romans 7:15**). but Jesus was certain and knew that he was about his father's work. So, if John was baptizing at the Jordan River as we have been told, a baptism for the remission of sins, then why on earth would Jesus feel the need to be baptized? One answer is that Jesus knew that John's ministry of baptism was an important one for us. Jesus shows solidarity with us. Jesus experiences life as we do and he shows us how faithful living works.

It is the way to see that heaven has opened for each of us and the Holy Spirit has descended on each of us. So, Jesus is baptized by John. It is the most important beginning or new beginning for his life, and it is the same for us. Even if we don't remember our baptism, and most of us do not, we were given at that time, an on-going promise. We have each of us been promised that we are loved, we are forgiven, and we are strengthened by God's action through the water of baptism. Jesus shows us by his words and by his example what is

important. And he humbled himself to be like us and be an example for us. This too is something that we do to follow Christ.

Our reading from Isaiah this morning tells us what God says to us when he does draw near, in baptism and in our times of prayer. “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name and you are mine.” Later God says “you are precious in my sight.” Precious - meaning of great value, highly esteemed, treasured.

Precious is a word fraught with the difficulty of grasping the true meaning – God’s meaning. It is hard to strip off all the connotations that have accreted to the word precious. We think of precious babies and things that are cute. Nowadays precious also means something that is too carefully crafted, overdone, overly special.

There’s a movie out now that many of you have heard about, maybe some of you have seen and it is called “Precious”. The movie “Precious” gives us an ironic overtone to the word. The movie is about a young woman whose name is Precious. She is poor, abused, and runs up against the most difficult, painful things life can throw at you. She’s not what we might consider beautiful, and so her name stands in stark contrast to how she looks, how she is treated, and how she feels about herself. In one scene Precious cries out in anguish that no one loves her. No one in her family has shown her any love or respect. Her social worker says, “Your baby loves you. And then, after a pause, she says, “I love you.” That’s what can change us as human beings. When we are told face to face, eye to eye, “I love you.” It can mean the difference between feeling truly claimed and redeemed and worthyand oblivion. That is what God wants us to know when the heavens are opened and we feel near to him. We ARE precious.

Jesus chose to be baptized by John in his ministry at the Jordan river. It was really scandalous. It is audacious to consider that what happens in baptism is that we are, no matter who we are and where we’ve been, and what we have done, we are precious in God’s eyes and loved. And

not only that, but other people, people that we might not think are so loveable are precious to God too. In our short reading from the Book of Acts, we are told that Peter and John went to Samaria to confirm the baptism of some in that country who had been baptized. Samaritans? Those people? You mean God would even love someone like that? You can substitute any name you want for Samaritans. Addicts and drunkards? Thieves? Murderers? Just think of a person or persons that you feel the least love and respect for and then realize what a scandal it is that God loves them too. Each of us will know that love if we are able to come to ourselves and see God's claim on us. Even people like you and me are precious in God's sight. Scandalous! Audacious!

I want us this morning to call to mind our own baptisms.

I have filled the baptismal font this morning with blessed water. I encourage you, when you come up to receive communion, to dip your fingers in the water, make the sign of the cross, on your forehead or on your body and remind yourself what God promised you when you were baptized. "I called you by name and you are mine." We are loved. Let the cool refreshing drops of water, that liquid which keeps us alive, remind you. No matter what, you are my son, the beloved. You are my daughter, the beloved.