

Baptism of Our Lord, C: 9 January 2011

Well, here we are again.

The 12 Days of Christmas have come and gone,
the greens are down and the crèche is put away,
and we find ourselves in the season of Epiphany,
or the *Sundays after Epiphany* to be liturgically correct.

The four to eight weeks of Epiphany usually don't receive much attention
in our consciousness and our education.

So let me review with you the richness of this season.

During Advent, we wait, prepare and make room for the coming of Jesus.

We ask ourselves, "Where will Jesus be born in me?"

During Christmas, we celebrate with awe and wonder this birth,
the coming of God in a tiny, vulnerable being.

We ask ourselves, "Can I hold him? What if I drop him? What gift can I give him?"

And now, in the season opening before us,

we reflect upon the character and nature of God in Jesus.

We ask ourselves, "What does Jesus have to teach me?"

How will I respond, what will I do, as the result of my reflection?"

Epiphany means "Manifestation, appearance, showing forth,"
and it refers to Jesus made manifest *to* and made manifest *through*
those who seek him.

The lessons for the feast that starts the season set the tone
for all the Sundays to follow.

They focus on the journey of the Magi, those foreign stargazers
who come seeking signs of God's presence in the world.

On one level, the message is that each of *us* has "gifts" that we bring to The Holy.

Yes, there is the old king, trying to thwart our journey,
trying to kill the birth of God in each of us.

But when we refuse to turn back, we discover The Holy, the Christ,
and we are transformed.

We are filled with surprise and wonder, we respond with adoration.

Today, in week one, Jesus surprises us with the baptism.

He enters our muddy waters and identifies with us.

This baptism affirms him as "chosen."

He, in turn, chooses us, unconditionally, in *our* baptism.

Hold on to this: this is important and I'll come back to it.

Throughout this season, Jesus, as God-made-manifest, continues to surprise us.

Whatever we expect him to be, he turns out to be something quite different,
something more.

We can't put him into a box.

Which in turn has consequences for *us* as well.

Take today.

*This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing.
Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.*

Every year on the first Sunday after the Feast of the Epiphany, we observe the Baptism of Jesus.

The gospel vividly brings us back to that moment when the Spirit bears down upon Jesus.

In that moment Jesus is praying, we are told, and his unique relationship to God is brought into full consciousness.

Today is one of five days in the church year when the celebration of baptism and the renewal of our baptismal covenant are deemed particularly appropriate. On this feast, we are given an invitation to ponder the deep meaning of our *own* baptism in relationship to *Jesus'* baptism.

His baptism set his ministry in motion; and, as each of us is baptized into Christ, it sets our ministries in motion as well.

This invitation to reflect anew on the ministry we each have been given through baptism seems particularly timely, as we have just begun a new *calendar* year, a milestone that *often* calls forth from us thoughts about how we are living our lives. (Think of all those New Year's resolutions!)

But now we are asked to consider the question in the context of lives that are *no longer our own* but have been taken up into the life of Christ.

Looking again at Jesus' baptism in this light, what we see may well surprise us:

We can see that as he emerges from the waters of the Jordan, Jesus experiences a deep and all-embracing oneness with God and an overwhelming sense of being the beloved.

The love that passes between Jesus and God in the Holy Spirit becomes the animating force of his life and expresses itself in a self-giving ministry of reconciliation.

This baptismal awareness is expressed with passionate urgency in his words and actions.

Beyond everything else, this experience of being encountered by love is a profoundly personal experience.

However, love by its very nature must give itself away.

So Jesus' baptism opens his heart to the world around him and *impels* him to move about teaching and preaching and healing, seeking to reconcile the world to God.

God's reign is now embodied in the person of Jesus, who does the work of God in seeking to draw all to himself.

Ultimately, it is this passionate desire to bring all things together and to break down all walls of division that drives him to the cross.

And what have our baptisms done to us?

God, in Jesus, becomes one with us and we, through Jesus, become one with God. Through baptism, we are inextricably bound together with others and declared limbs—body parts—of the risen Lord who lives his life of reconciling love *in and through* us.

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Through baptism, God's love now becomes embodied in *us*.
Baptism, therefore, is *God's* act before it is our own.
God draws us to the divine Self and takes us out of our presumed separateness
into a new web of relationship that unites us with others.
Surprise, surprise.

C.S. Lewis wrote that we are often surprised by joy.
I believe the same is true of love.
Certainly that has been *my* truth.
When my life finally got to the point where I could bring into full consciousness
my *own* unique relationship to God,
where I could allow myself to hear the small still voice of God saying,
"I love you. I love you.", it came as a complete surprise.
"Me? *You* love *me*???"
"Yes," came the answer, strong and clear.
"You are my beloved child."
As with Jesus, my overwhelming sense of that profound love
began a journey into the mystery that lies at the heart of God,
one that ultimately led me to my *own* sense of identity and mission,
my *own* passionate urgency.
This is a journey of discovery in which we are *all* called to share.
In our baptism we *each* of us *put on* Christ and are transformed into his likeness.
Remember, God's love in Christ Jesus
is not the private logo or domain of "religious" people.
The divine love is universal and cannot be contained or confined.

I'm going to ask my able assistants to pass among you and distribute a pledge card.
Don't be alarmed; we are not asking you for more money!
This is a different kind of pledge card, one that you don't have to return...
at least not to anyone here.
Even though in some ways it's a pledge you're making to *everyone* here...
and everyone *outside* this place as well.
But principally this pledge is a covenant between you and God.
A renewal of the corporate promises made in the baptismal covenant,
but more personal in nature.

Review it with me as I read...

I'm asking us all to be mindful in this Epiphany season of the many ways
that the love of God known to and through Jesus is embodied, manifested,
in and through *us*.
Write out your pledge.
Discuss it with your friends or family.
Then, for the next two months, keep a journal.
Refer to it daily.
Write down your reflections and questions and ask for grace after each journal entry.
At every opportunity, open yourself up to wonder and surprise.

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Like the Magi, go on the journey;
search for signs of God's presence; refuse to turn back.
Honor your longing for The Holy in your deepest self
and in the community to whom you are bound through baptism.
Listen to the music of your own life and the lives of those around you.
See where Christ shows up inside our faith community.
See where he shows up outside our faith community as well...
outside the church...outside the expected places and people...outside the box.
Look for him and his love in all the *wrong* places and at all the *wrong* times.
And when love surprises, and I guarantee you it will,
decide what you will do to deepen your response.
We *must* allow ourselves to be surprised.
The greater the surprise, the greater our response.
And that has the power to *change the world*.

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