

Sermon from the 1st Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A

9 January 2023

St. Matthew's Riverdale; the Rev. Trent Pettit

Is 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43; Mt 3:13-17

In 2014, I got to celebrate Christmas on pilgrimage in the Holy Land. That experience deeply affected me in ways that I did not expect, but the thing that did not immediately impact me — not really until preparing for this sermon actually — was seeing the Jordan River.

Okay, so, my guide thought that it would be good idea to show our group the “real” Jordan river. Now, there are two different places on the Jordan River that tourists are usually taken, which is why I was, tentatively, excited by seeing something else. After all, I was *not* a tourist, but a pilgrim.

Most people go to the part of the Jordan where the water is desirably lush and clean, a place where people go to be non-Christianly re-baptized where Jesus was. There's also another site people often go to where there's a beautiful, ancient stone church, with a stair, built into the earth, which guides people down into a fresh pool of clear, ankle-deep water.

Sounds pretty cool, right? Well, I didn't get to see either of these places.

No; when we arrived to the “Jordan,” we drove up on a scruffy-looking bank, which apparently chased off a few old men who had been lazily fishing and drinking there. This was not the Jordan I had seen in pictures: more brown than green; more mud than flora. There were no exultant signs: no ancient stone chapels, no triumphant stair. It was excruciatingly banal. It looked exactly like every grimy watering hole my grandpa and I fished at when I was a kid in the swamps of the American deep south. This didn't look like the “Holy Land,” to me, but my guide was insistent that Jesus probably encountered John on one of the these more ordinary-looking turns in the River than somewhere else.

Of course, the Gospel isn't focused on the landscape surrounding Jesus' Baptism. The Gospels are not biographies, so this is of no real concern to us. *This* is the story of God come among us. But John the Baptist, too, had his expectations. And John, too, was shocked at God's reversal of expectations which occurred when Jesus, the Messiah, came to submit himself to the baptism of repentance.

In some sense, we might expect this, though, on some level, right? After all, even before Jesus was born we heard him called, “the son of David,” and “the son of Abraham,” names that identify Jesus with Israel.

But, today, is the First Sunday of the Epiphany, where we remember the revelation of the incarnation of the Christ, first, to Israel, which we do kinda expect, and then, to those we do not, the Gentiles. Already the Kingdom is coming in ways we cannot anticipate.

The first day of Epiphany was this past Friday, on which day we recalled the magi's arrival to the manger and *their* unexpected, worshipful-turn. They were originally sent as spies of Herod, but

upon the “epiphany” of Jesus’ identity, they were converted and offered him gifts. Epiphany is an irregular time, indeed, however, fitting, it seems, as a “next step” after Christmas: Jesus is born to the Jews, and then, he is presented before the Gentiles. But as we look deeper we discover a complicated scene.

Consider the gifts the magi presented to Jesus. On one level they are totally expected. The gift of gold is a fitting sign of kingship. The incense attests to Jesus’ deity, since incense is used in the Temple in Israel’s worship. But the gift of myrrh foreshadows a funeral. What a strange gift. As biblical scholar and Anglican priest, Wesley Hill, observes: “The myrrh casts a *shadow* over the other two gifts, forcing us to ask whether the kingship and deity of Jesus will somehow culminate in tragedy. . . . Or, as T.S. Eliot’s great poem, “The Journey of the Magi” has it, when the wise men crest the hills of Judea and make their way toward Bethlehem, what they see is ‘*three trees on the low sky.*’”¹ Already, the Cross is in view, right here at the nativity, the babe is born to die.

And, so, the epiphany in Jesus’ baptism is the one that the gift of myrrh anticipates: the vicarious suffering the Lord’s Beloved, who would be “baptized” on the Cross for the sins of the whole world.

This all seems “down season” for Christmas time, but in Acts, as we heard earlier, when Peter tells the story of the Gospel, he *begins* with Jesus’ baptism (Acts 10: 37-39). The resurrection is then the climax of the “*new creation*” begun by Jesus’ conception.

Unexpectedly, God comes as the Baptized God. By being baptized, Jesus reveals the extent to which he is willing to be submerged in Israel’s sin, and, indeed, the sinful condition of the world.

When we look at the world today we might find it strange that God finds it worth delivering, or, maybe look at our own lives and wonder the same; yet, that’s what makes God’s decision in Christ so amazing, so “full of grace.” (Lk 1:28; Jn 1:14). The shadow of judgement meant for us falls *not* on us; rather, God has elected for it to fall on himself; and, so, we read in James (1:17): “*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.*”

Maybe my guide in Palestine understood this. It’s almost as if he wanted, by showing us the lamer Jordan River, to make sure we stayed focused here, to ensure that we stayed focused on the *actual* world that God came to save. I guess, he wanted to chasten us from “prettifying up” the story, lest we fail to see Jesus, the light.

So the Gospel shows us how Jesus’ baptism points to how he is the light, by pointing us back to the beginning of Genesis and its connection to water and the Spirit. In the book of Genesis we’re told about the Spirit that swept over the waters of chaos. First, there’s chaos, the Spirit, and then the *voice* from God who says over creation, “this is good.”

¹ <http://www.mbird.com/2016/01/the-strange-kingship-of-epiphany/>

And, here, at Jesus' baptism, we have all of this again: Jesus in the water and the Spirit descending. The heavens open up, and Jesus—like Israel coming through the sea on dry land—the Spirit descends like a dove and the voice from above says, *“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”*

This is Jesus' coronation. As the Father anoints the Son to rule over the nations, he decrees it to be so in the words of Psalm 2:7: *“You are my son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.”*

So, in both the stories of the nativity and in Jesus' baptism, we have a story about the Epiphany of what it means for Jesus to be unleashed in the world. And, his mission will not be easy; as theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, says, *“He is the Beloved Son who must undergo the terror produced by our presumption that we are our own creators.”* So, Jesus submits to John's baptism just as he will submit to the crucifixion, so that we might know how God would rule the world, to re-unite heaven and earth, God and humanity. The Epiphany of the Christ is about what it means for our lives if the world is *being and will be changed* by Jesus, its King.

In Jesus' birth and baptism we see the beginning of the work that will bring about the new creation. So in Epiphany, we look back at Christmas, at Jesus' birth, and simultaneously, look ahead, to the death and resurrection of the Son and the baptism in which *we* are re-born in him.

Just as Israel of old was gathered at the Jordan River at her exile and scattering, now a new humanity is being gathered around Christ beside the very same bank. The shore of Rachel's weeping has now been turned into that of Mary's rejoicing.

All so unexpected. What we see in the crib at Christmas is the Epiphany of the God come in the flesh to bind our wounds in-person, so as to show us our true humanity, that humanness that God intended and that he restores in us.

But, what would it mean if we *really* believed all of this is true?

Maybe God has come in this way — as a baby — so that we might approach him. It is unexpected that this is how the Lord comes in power and great might, that this vulnerability reveals the manner of his conquering love and grace.

Maybe God comes in this way, in the hiddenness of a child, in a hiddenness about as anything that happens in the deep South is... lacking in apparent honor... and, he comes to be baptized by another, ... all to show us how deep God's desire is to be One-with us, the he would be so mired in a solidarity that draws him ever-deeper into our vulnerability and sin.

God's ability to be with us in this way is the way he shows his power. He, the light, can enter our darkness, of sin, brokenness, and death, but is not overcome; rather, our darkness is that which is overcome by him.

Maybe God does all of this to show us then that no matter how broken we are, no matter how sinful we are, no matter how *small* we think we are, that the bandage of his very self applies even to us. We might want to just stay here at repentance, stay here at our lowliness; yet, the Kingdom come to us and demands that we stand, to reckon with the dignity that God's incarnation affords ours.

The Kingdom, of course, is come and is coming in Jesus; it is not something we can produce. We are called to stand and bear witness to its coming, in whatever way God calls us. That's what the Epiphany means for us... that God has come in hiddenness, to seek us out, who, like the first humans, *hid*, in shame; to draw us out into his light and make us to stand with him again.

Our felt-smallness and our sinfulness, makes us feel like we need to draw back, to stay in the dark. But, if the Epiphany is true, it would make this drawing back into a kind of "denial" of what God has done.

The force of the disappointment I felt at my guide's decision to bring us to the apparently "more real" Jordan River, forced me, anyway, ... to recognize that the Father's Beloved Son came excruciatingly *here*— if you know what I mean—he came to *this world*, ... *was* baptized in a place as apparently boring as a backyard in southern Louisiana. And if God would come to us in *this world* and in this way, doesn't that mean that he does actually come to save *people like you and me*?

If that is true, wouldn't that mean that in your own corner of the world—however utterly typical or utterly unredeemable and fallen, it seems to you—that Christ's light shines even there?

If we say, "yes," that means that we have to ask ourselves if we're willing to concede to God's call, to be drawn to his light... and bear witness to his Kingdom, his Kingdom come and coming exactly in a world that looks desperately like the one we know. He comes exactly to the person—each of us—that looks desperately the way we do.

If it is true, the revelation of the one true God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — and his desire to remake you by his grace and mercy, wouldn't it mean that you utterly matter?

Wouldn't it mean that before the life-denying or life-hating thought, you would disarm yourself before the Lord's utter affirmation over you, "this is my Beloved son or daughter" ?

Wouldn't it mean that hoarded wealth would give way to generosity, before the revelation that you are not alone?

Wouldn't it mean that sin would be repented of, since your true humanity has finally been revealed to you?

What would it mean for your life to be given over for God's life to illumine?

Your answer to that question *is* the Epiphany of the "light" to which the nations will throng, that is, to the Servant of the Lord, the One of the prophet's boast, the One of every heart's longing.

Amen.