

Sermon: Descending Like a Dove

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Mark 1:4-11; Acts 19:1-7**

Every time we turn around, it seems as if we're in another new church season and today is no different.

Yesterday, January 6, for Western Christians, the Christmas season ended with the feast of Epiphany, also called the feast of the Three Kings, which commemorates the visit of the Magi to the Christ child, which signifies Jesus' first appearance to Gentiles. Eastern Christians, on the other hand, celebrate January 6 as Jesus' first appearance to the *world* as the Son of God, through his baptism by John.

The Western church waits until the first Sunday *after* Epiphany, which is today, to celebrate Jesus' baptism. It might not be a big surprise to hear that there are two competing sites on the Jordan River that each consider themselves to be *the* original site of the baptism of Jesus and the ministry of John the Baptist. One is called Qasr el Yahud on the west bank, and Al-Maghtas on the east bank.

The irony of it all is, we can't prove a thing. The three Magi may not have found Jesus until years later, if at all. Where exactly John and Jesus stood in the Jordan will remain unknown to us. All we really *know* is what the Bible tells us.

Now let's look at the creche. There are several symbolic groups represented here: Jesus, Mary, and Joseph; the Magi; a lone shepherd; and some angels. This scene represents the traditional view of Epiphany according to the Western church:



Mary and Joseph need no introduction, and Jesus just showed up last week, since Christmas was on a Monday.

But it's the Magi and the shepherd that give the scene its theological power. Only Matthew includes the story of the Gentile wise men, the astrologers, or 'magi' in Greek, coming to visit the newborn Jesus in Bethlehem. Matthew doesn't tell us how many wise men showed up, but later traditions say there were twelve, for the twelve tribes of Israel.

Matthew only tells us there were three *gifts*: Gold, for a king; pleasant-smelling Frankincense used to indicate the presence of a deity; and Myrrh, used for anointing and embalming, which foreshadows the Easter event. These gifts identify Jesus as the King of kings; as a messiah or anointed one; and as a suffering servant.

When they meet Herod, the wise men quote Scripture, of course; they're fulfilling a prophecy. They blend Micah 5:2 with 2 Samuel 5:2 and tell Herod, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.”

Which brings us to the shepherd. Where the Magi are upper-class Gentiles, the shepherd is a very low-class Jew. In the first century, shepherds were poor, nomadic, and possibly criminal social outcasts and were regarded with suspicion. And yet, in Luke, an angel of the Lord visited some shepherds and told them of a sign for them of a 'child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' Then, the angel praised God, saying:

‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!

In this case, it was the lowly shepherds whom God favored, and they made unquestioning haste to get to Bethlehem to see this thing which the Lord had made known to them.

The creche compresses all of this into a peaceful, hopeful scene of the incarnate God who became like us that we might become like God. That's Epiphany, the entire Jesus story right here. And it's the immediate prelude to Jesus' baptism, which we commemorate today.

Thanks to the teachings of the Eastern church, in Jesus' baptism we see for the first time the union between God the Creator, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit; we see the humanity in Jesus as he accepts baptism from John; and with the opening of the heavens above him, we have our first vision of life beyond life.

In Mark's baptism account, we have water, the Holy Spirit, and the voice of God, which sounds a lot like Genesis 1. It turns out that Jesus, baptized as if he were in need of repentance, is actually the divine architect come to save us from ourselves.

Water, the Holy Spirit, and the voice of God are also meant to remind us of the Flood, when God came to Noah, and of the Exodus, when God lifted the Israelites up out

of slavery in Egypt. With all that as the implied background, Mark's account of Jesus' baptism intends to show us that God is still at work in the world.

In addition to the Gospel reading, the lectionary gives us three different aspects of Christian baptism. We chose to focus on Paul's re-baptism of those previously baptized by John but who had no knowledge of the Holy Spirit, which indicates they might have been early converts *before* Jesus came out of the wilderness.

So, John the baptizer, the new Elijah, was busily engaged in religious activity in the wilderness, at the far edges of Jewish civilization. People from throughout the countryside and from Jerusalem, the religious center of Israel, were going out to him. Then Jesus arrived from a place of poverty and political inconsequence to begin a ministry that would announce the kingdom of God and challenge the very powers that caused this situation. In his baptism, Jesus is confirmed as the One who bears in his body and in his ministry the presence of God through the Holy Spirit.

Mark says that, as he was coming up out of the water, *Jesus* saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, saying 'You are my Son, the Beloved.' Only Jesus saw and heard these things, which makes one wonder, how did Mark come to know of it? Is it important that *only* Jesus saw and heard these things?

What's matters most for us, even if no one else noticed, is that the heavens were torn open, that heaven and earth touched and were joined together.

Proclaiming the kingdom of God as John and Jesus did, in a time and place where doing so could become dangerous, calls for establishing justice, mercy, and peace for everyone, something which the powers and authorities that be often resist doing.

It's been that way for a long time and it's not going to change any time soon.

This past week has been a good one for New North Church. Just last Sunday, the entire assembled congregation ministered to and aided a person in need. Later in the week, a family reached out to us and asked for fuel assistance which we were able to provide through one of our outreach ministries. We're doing our job as a church when we can meet these needs as they arise and when we do it without question, as the shepherds did when they responded to the angel of the Lord.

And yet our own means are, at the moment, meager. It's zero degrees outside and we're worshipping in the parlor by the merry warmth of a fireplace because heating the sanctuary on a day like this would be a ridiculous burden. What better time to be the church than when we are helping people despite our own circumstances? In its actions, this church embodies what faith looks like.

For Jesus, baptism meant following a call to proclaim God's presence to everyone, especially to the least among us, from the shepherds to the Magi, from the cold and hungry to the emperor. Jesus' message might not be good news for everyone, but it is meant to be *heard* by everyone.

Do we still feel God's presence in our lives? Speaking only for myself, yes, or I wouldn't be here; I'd either be dead or sitting on my butt somewhere eating salty snacks and doing nobody any good. Today is a good time to symbolically renew our baptism, to be mindful of our connection to Jesus through a baptism of repentance and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to remember Jesus' ministry, which we are called to take up as our own, and to rejoice and be thankful for God's ongoing saving presence in our lives.

Amen.