



University Christian Church – Austin

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BAPTIZED INTO WHAT?
 Epiphany 1, b, Jan. 10, 2010
 Luke 3:15-22

In what at first seems a strange matching, for centuries the Christian church has celebrated today both the baptism of Jesus as we heard from Luke 3.... and on this same day we celebrate Epiphany, the coming of the three Magi, to adore the infant Jesus. "Epiphany", meaning the manifestation of God, especially to the non-Jewish world, to the Gentiles, as Messiah not just of the Israel, but of the whole world.

This morning let us honor both of these and aim to discover-- the connection between the two.

I.

You know the story of the 3 Magi. They were astrologers, holy men, maybe even kings. Clearly these were some of the most sensitive folk of their eastern provinces to the spiritual, the numinous. For they were quite willing to leave their high status, comfortable and the conventional lives in the east, for a strange journey west, following a special star in the sky.

T.S. Eliot captures the intrinsic spiritual drama in his poem, The Journey of

the Magi. With the bitter cold we have been experiencing ourselves the past couple of days we may be especially able to understand it....

[Read the Poem]

TEXT at http://www.ishk.org/school/poem/poem_013.html

“I should be glad of another death.”

They came seeking birth... and found it.....but it was spiritually & psychologically confusing because this birth of the New always necessarily means the Death of the old. You must let go of this way of living in order to embrace that way of living. And if one is walking forward spiritually, following the dynamic light of God's revelation; there must needs be these times of painful letting go of what we know and trust.... in order to be able to accept the challenge and the blessing of the next stage of our growth toward God. To receive this Epiphany... this revelation of God, means that life will never be the OLD Way anymore. To receive this Epiphany means being baptized into something NEW.

II.

But if we are alert, we will recognize that each of us, indeed, everyone of us, has been previously baptized by into something else. The word “baptize” means, “to be immersed,” to be thoroughly surrounded by and inculcated in. What is it

that we exist in like fish exist in water? How would you describe what the Bible calls “the spirit of the world,”¹ the spirit of the dominant planetary culture around us? Would you use phrases like:

- taking care of me and mine
- getting what I need and what I want
- making my life secure, safe, comfortable, successful, entertained

These all point to values of a self-serving spirit – a spirit that does, indeed, dominate our world today – a spirit that has not allowed the honoring of God's will to rise to the place of chief importance. It is not for particular immoral acts – as such- but to this very self-centered spirit that the Bible calls “the power of sin.”

And it is in this morning's passage that we find John the Baptist who represented the very best of the old prophetic tradition of the Hebrew religion, who stands on the banks of the Jordan River and calls the people to REPENT of such sin, to be baptized and be washed clean, to dedicate themselves to serving the Living God and to ready themselves for the coming of the one greater than he. “Come,” calls John, “and be forgiven of that brokenness, that sinfulness, that self-centeredness which clings so closely.”

And then it is Jesus, the sinless one – already completely devoted to honoring God- who wades in to the water... and a reluctant John, because he feels

unworthy, baptizes Jesus.

Then as Jesus is coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart, and the Holy Spirit descending upon him there in the water, and the voice of God announces, "You are my Son, the beloved, and in you I am well pleased."

Epiphany: the revelation of God.

And the old eon passes away in that moment as the new is born. Just as surely as at the manger in Bethlehem where the Wise Men knelt; 30 years later here on the banks of the Jordan is both birth and death. For new wine bursts old skins. The seed must fall into the earth, in order to yield grain the next year.

"Those who lose their life for my sake, will find it."

Jesus is driven into the desert by the Spirit... to be tempted by Satan. It was the necessary next step in the journey for Him. It is the same journey for us, too. Leaving our status, our comfortable and conventional lives, for a strange journey into our own desert experience, following where God leads, trusting resources that God provides.

III.

[Holding the Bible forward]

This beloved Bible at the center of our worshiping community is a whole library of books that chronicle how God has spoken to us in the past. And we need

it so desperately because our hearing often isn't so good. Sometimes in our private reading of it we inadvertently misunderstand what it is trying to teach us.

Sometimes we listen to preachers who use the Bible to say things that we would like hear, but are not true. It is possible to get it wrong if we are paying attention. But let's be honest, far and away the biggest reason we do not understand what the Spirit of God is trying to say to us through the Bible, through prayer time, through spiritually oriented reading... is that we simply aren't giving the Spirit our attention. We aren't putting ourselves in those places that the Holy Spirit will most likely carry out our needed spiritual transformation.

Let me share an example. At the end of each worship service here it is my pleasure to greet you as you depart the Sanctuary. On those occasions when you say something like, "I appreciated what you said in your sermon today," and when we've time enough to chat, you may have noticed that I like to ask you in return, "What part of the sermon did you most like?"

Maybe as often as 30% of the time, you will say you were moved by a part of the sermon that I didn't even say! Now, I confess that as a young preacher that used to upset me. After all I'd worked hard on that sermon! But it didn't take me long to begin to understand that the Holy Spirit was using the sermon time to speak to people, sometimes with the words that I would say, but often taking a thought

here or a word there and fashioning in the hearts and minds of those assembled in the Sanctuary just exactly something that that particular person needed to hear that morning.

The very same phenomena works in your praying, your reading, your reflecting on your service to others. The Holy Spirit consistently feeds you your needed spiritual food as you place yourself in positions of openness, of receptivity.

In his classic work entitled “Fear and Trembling,” an allusion to the Apostle Paul's challenge to his readers of his letter at the church in Philippi,ⁱⁱ to “work out their salvation in fear and trembling,” the Danish Philosopher and Pastor, Soren Kierkegaard reflect on how it is in the outer world controlled by a spirit, but not God's spirit. Too often in this outer world those who connive and manipulate are rewarded with material gain and those who are meek, those who sensitive others, those care.... are simply crushed by those all too ready and willing to exercise power over them.

Kierkegaard says, “It is different in the world of spirit. Here an eternal divine order prevails, here it does not rain both upon the just and upon the unjust, here the sun does not shine both upon the good and upon the evil, here it holds good that only he who works gets the bread, only he who was in anguish finds repose, only he who descends into the underworld rescues the beloved, only he

who draws the knife gets Isaac.”

For the Magi on the Road to Bethlehem,

For Jesus at the Jordan River and His way towards the desert,

For you and me striving to overcome complacency & to fulfill that higher call that we sense on the horizon,

THE ROAD IS NOT AN EASY ONE, but we were never promised “easy.”

My friends, a new year has just dawned and it holds within it so many opportunities for all of us to be baptized -to be completely immersed - into God's Spirit, Whose design is to fulfill us completely.

Amen.

i 1 Corinthians 2.12

ii Phil. 2:12 Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; 13for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.