

Gospel: Matthew 3:13-17

¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. ¹⁶And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

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Baptism as Epiphany

by Intern Pastor Jory Mickelson

What is Epiphany? Many of us know it as the 12th day of Christmas, when the Christmas season officially ends. We also know it as a feast day in the church commemorating the coming of the Magi or Wise Men to the child Jesus. We celebrated this feast last Sunday.

But what is an Epiphany exactly? One meaning is the appearance or manifestation of a divine being, like when the angels announced the birth of the Messiah to the shepherds. Jesus was an epiphany, the Living Word of God made flesh.

But there are other definitions of Epiphany that really gets to me when I look at today's scriptures. Epiphany, a sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature of something. Let me repeat that: a sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature of something. A shift in perception where the essential nature of a person or a thing is revealed to us.

Epiphany, an illuminating discovery. A realization. A disclosure. But why am I telling you about Epiphany when the gospel of Matthew is telling us about the baptism on Jesus? How can Jesus' baptism be a discovery or a disclosure?

Jesus went out to the River Jordan to be baptized by his cousin John (the Baptist). John said, "No way Jesus! You are the one with the power and might here, baptize me." To which Jesus replies, "Actually John, you need to baptize ME, because there is a bunch of scripture saying this is how it works out." The gospel of Matthew in verse 15 says, "it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." But in the vernacular of the Big Lebowski, it translates to "We gotta fulfil the scriptures dude!"

The Greek word for righteousness says dikaiosyne (Dee-ki-o-see-nay) is like a judicial approval, but from God. So we know from the Greek that Jesus says he needs to get baptized by John because God has a plan, because God has already approved this course of events. Because it was set down in scripture.

So, Jesus gets dunked by John and as Jesus comes up out of the water, maybe sputtering, maybe with river water in his ears and maybe even a little up his nose, and as Jesus was rising up from the river, the heavens broke open to him. He had an epiphany. The nature of the spiritual universe broke open for Jesus. He saw the Holy Spirit descend in the form of a dove. A spiritual bird lands on Jesus—maybe on the top of his head with his hair still dripping wet from river water.

Jesus rises from the water and the sky breaks open to him and a bird drops down from the sky and lands on him. Then Jesus hears a voice from heaven—some translations say, BEHOLD—which in the Greek means to perceive or see with the mind, to see spiritually. So we have Jesus hearing in his mind, maybe not a physical booming voice from the clouds but from the spiritual reality that has been opened to him, "This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

Jesus has an epiphany, an illumination discovery. Through his baptism the heavens open up to him. Jesus has an epiphany, a realization—he is indeed the Son of God, and God’s Beloved. Jesus. Jesus has an epiphany, a disclosure—God reveals who Jesus is and how much God loves Jesus. All from getting dipped in a river by his cousin. This scene ends the 3rd Chapter of Matthew and immediately, Chapter 4 begins with the words: “ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil.”

So the same dove that alights on Jesus is now leading him into the wilderness. Leading him spiritually? Flying a little ahead and waiting for Jesus to follow, like a feathered Lassie? We don’t know for sure. But we do know that Jesus is baptized, he has an incredible spiritual revelation where he is told that he is a child of God and deeply loved, and then Jesus is guided to spend some alone time in a wild place where he will be tempted.

Quite the contrast. A moment of glory, and then back to regular life. A spiritual revelation and then Jesus has that revelation tested, put the test, facing all pains, longings, and wants of human life. An epiphany and then back to facing the dishes in the sink, the irritating neighbor, the family member calling at just the wrong time and saying the wrong thing they always say. It sounds a lot like our daily lives, doesn’t it? We get a good feeling in church, maybe a moment of peace, and then we are sent back out into the busy, bothersome world.

At his baptism, Jesus is revealed to be the Son of God, the BELOVED with a capital B, but Jesus is still in a human body full of wants, needs, desires, longings, and urges. A real human being in a real human life. Just like us. Tempted, annoyed, sweaty, hangry, grieving, laughing, sleepy and impatient just like us. Jesus, the Living Word, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, had a fully human body that functioned just like ours, a fully human brain that raced around just like ours, good and bad days just like us. That is what it means to have a God with skin on. The word made flesh. A God with us.

Jesus was baptized in the Jordan and had an epiphany about who and what he was to God. We too are baptized in the Lutheran tradition. Our baptism too, is a discovery and a disclosure of who and what we are in God’s eyes. Martin Luther declared that Baptism was so powerful that it was God’s own act. Luther says, “to be baptized in God’s name is to be baptized not by human beings but by God himself.”

For Luther, and for us Lutherans today, Baptism is both the beginning and the ending of who we are, the very center of our identity. Because in the sacrament of Baptism, you and I, just like Jesus in the gospel today are named and claimed by God. We are named and claimed by God forever. Named at God’s own beloved children. Claimed as part of God’s family forever. No takebacks. No expiration date.

Let me say it again, in our baptism, in YOUR baptism, even if you were a little tiny baby and don’t remember it, you are named as a beloved child of God, and in your baptism the Loving One claims you as part of their family forever. You. The person sitting next to you. The members of the choir. Me! By our baptism, through the ritual of water and word, we become a family. Not just any family, but God’s own family. A family of love and loving that stretches all the way

back to John dunking Jesus in the Jordan River and extends right up to today. Right now. Right here. And that family extends all the way forward into the future, to the very end of time.

Now THAT is incredible. It's amazing, Your baptism, travels all the way back in time and unites you with Jesus in the scriptures today. Your baptism goes all the way forward from the Jordan River across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, across two-thousand years and to today. To this building where you are sitting. There is a connection. A stream. A mighty river of grace that flows from the Holy One at our baptism and brings us into the mighty waters of God's family from the beginning all the way to the end. Beyond the boundaries of our lifetime. Beyond the boundaries of our children and grandchildren's lifetimes. All the way until the very end of time.

This might be the very flood that Psalm 29 talks about in verse 10, "The Lord sits enthroned above the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forevermore." The flood of grace. The mighty waters of baptism that unite each one of us, into something so much bigger than ourselves. So much stronger than our own efforts. So much mightier than all of today's worries or bad news.

Jesus was baptized and then led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. You hear this sermon today and are sent back out into the world to deal with snow, or traffic, or illness or hardship, or worst of all other people! We hear the Word today, but we also must remember it. We receive the Living Word today, but we also must carry it with us all through the week.

You are baptized! You are God's beloved child! Nothing can take that from you. Nothing can stand against that—not illness, not financial insecurity, not an unknown future. Nothing. Nothing stands between you and the Loving One, between you and the Mighty One, between you and the God of Heaven because you are baptized. You are God's own. We are God's family. We are never alone, never forsaken, never beyond reach. You are never alone. You are not forsaken. You are never beyond God's reach. You're not. No matter what has happened. By your baptism God is always reaching out a hand to you. The Loving One is always reaching to embrace you as their own beloved child.

You and I, all of us together, have been named and claimed by God. We must remember this. We must remind one another. We are not just baptized on Sundays when we attend church. We are baptized once and for all time. We must say again and again, "I am named and claimed by a loving God. You are my family. We are loved, saved, and renewed by the Almighty One. At all times. In all places. In every circumstance, you/I/we are loved and held by God. We are full of grace and more is flowing toward us. We are never beyond God's loving embrace.

So when we leave here today, remember Jesus' baptism. Remember his epiphany and our own. Say to yourself, I am baptized! This is my prayer to you this week, the prayer of the psalmist today in verse 11, "O Lord, give strength to your people; give them, O Lord, the blessings of peace." And let all of us know to our very core that we are baptized and nothing can stand against that grace, that mighty water. That our baptism even now and for the rest of our lives is bringing us into the loving arms of our God. This is the good news I have heard and bring to you today.