

Sermon for 1st Sunday After Epiphany (January 9, 2022)
Church of the Holy Trinity, Middletown CT
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- Today is the first Sunday after the Feast of Epiphany, which takes place every year on January 6.
- Epiphany is one of the seven principal feasts observed by the Church: Christmas, Easter, Palm Sunday, Ascension, Pentecost, Trinity Sunday, and Epiphany.
- In our church, it is also the name of the liturgical season between the twelfth day of Christmas and Lent
- Now, most of the other feasts are probably familiar to you – certainly Christmas, Easter, and Palm Sunday, and the names of Ascension and Trinity Sunday pretty much tell you what we’re celebrating.
- But Epiphany is probably a bit of a mystery to many Christians.
- So this is going to start out as an educational sermon – and to be quite honest, some of the things I am going to tell you were new to me when I started doing my research for today’s preaching.
- First, the word, ‘epiphany’.
- It’s not a word we use very often. What does it mean?
- It’s made up of two Greek words.
- The *phan* part is from the Greek word that means “shine” or “appear”.
- It’s the same word that St. John uses when he says at the beginning of his Gospel, “the light shines in the darkness”.

- And Epiphany has long been understood as a festival of light – marked with Earthly lights, but signifying the uncreated light that John tells us shines forth from Christ.
- The prefix “Epi” means “around” or “outward”.
- So an Epiphany is a shining outward, both revealing the source of the light – in this case Christ – and illuminating the surrounding darkness.
- The Eastern church uses a different word for this same feast: *theophany*.
- The *phan* part is the same (shining or showing).
- *Theos* is the Greek word for God – so it is the shining forth of God in the person of Jesus Christ.
- Or sometimes, this shining forth or showing forth is paraphrased as *manifestation* – God becoming manifest in Christ, and Christ’s Godhood becoming manifest to us.
- But this all sounds like a rather abstract concept – not a concrete event like the birth or resurrection of Jesus.
- So what is it that we remember and celebrate on Epiphany?
- I suspect that if you all wrote answers in the chat, we’d get two different answers.
- Some would say “the adoration of the magi” – that is, the visit of the three kings or wise men to Jesus’ crib in Bethlehem.
- But others would say “the baptism of Jesus”, which is indeed what we heard about in today’s Gospel.
- This doesn’t seem to be getting any clearer.
- But in fact, both are right.

- In the Western church – Catholicism and its descendants like our own church, the focus of Epiphany is the visitation of the magi.
- In the Eastern Orthodox churches, however, it is the baptism of Jesus.
- *Our* lectionary contains the story of the wise men on the actual feast day, January 6, and the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan on the first Sunday of Epiphany (today), so we get both.
- In the first, Jesus' identity receives *human* confirmation: the people of Bethlehem learn from the Persian magi that this baby is the king of kings.
- Jesus' kingdom is made manifest.
- In the second, it receives *Divine* confirmation, in visible and audible form, as the Spirit descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove, while the voice of the Father is heard proclaiming Him to be God's own co-eternal Son. Christ's divinity is made manifest.
- This is, by the way, to the best of my recollection, is the only place in the New Testament where the three persons of the Trinity are all manifest at once: Jesus standing in the water, the Father speaking from heaven, and the Spirit appearing in the form of a dove.
- It is thus a marvelous and unique event, and it is about this, and not the three kings, that I shall speak today.
- Why is it that we distinguish Christ's manifestation at Epiphany from his birth, which we already celebrated on Christmas?
- Did God not become manifest by becoming flesh?
- That he did, in the sense that He came to us in a form that mortals could see, and hear, and touch.
- But the full identity of this babe, who was indeed already God made flesh, was not yet known.

- The magi knew something of it – Matthew has them describe him a great king to shepherd Israel, but nothing about him being God incarnate, or the redeemer of the world.
- And as far as we know, Jesus grew up without the people around him suspecting anything out of the ordinary.
- Remember that when he came back and preached in his home town of Galilee, his neighbors were astonished and said “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Don’t we know his brothers and sisters? Where’s he getting all this?”
- Even John the Baptist, who had been told to watch for the one on whom the Spirit descended and rested, says that he did not know who it was going to be, even though Jesus was his own cousin.
- It is only at his baptism that Jesus’ identity as God the Son is revealed, and it is only after this that his miracles and teaching begin.
- John the Baptist sees it first – when Jesus is still approaching to be baptized, the Baptist proclaims “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” and confirms that this is the one that he had been told about.
- But it is the voice of the Father and the descent of the Holy Spirit that tell us who he really is – that this is in fact the Son of God – or, perhaps better, as we understand it through the lens of the Gospels, God the Son, who had been with the Father from the beginning.
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- But John also says something else, asking Jesus why he is coming to be baptized by John, when it is John who needs to be baptized by Jesus.
- And it’s a good question.
- It isn’t just that Jesus is someone greater than John – as John puts it, one “whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”

- The baptism that John offered was for repentance and the forgiveness of sins.
- But Jesus was without sin.
- He was not in need of the baptism John offered, at least not for His own sake.
- It's important to understand here that Christian baptism – the baptism that we received – is different from John's baptism.
- John's baptism was only for repentance and the forgiveness of sins.
- Christian baptism does indeed involve the forgiveness of sin as well.
- But that is not all it involves.
- It also involves the entry of the Holy Spirit into our hearts.
- We see this distinction at work twice in the Book of Acts, when the Apostles find people who are baptizing, but it is only John's baptism of repentance and forgiveness.
- The people who had received *this* baptism did not receive the Holy Spirit, even though the people the Apostles had baptized did receive it.
- The Apostles then lay hands on them and prayed for the Holy Spirit, and then it came upon them as it had upon the Apostles themselves and those they had baptized.
- And they taught the people doing the baptizing to baptize in a different way: in the threefold name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as we do in all the world's churches today.
- Those whom John baptized may well have been forgiven their sins, but the Holy Spirit did not descend upon them as it descended upon Jesus.

- So in our Gospel today, we see, not only a manifestation of Jesus as the only Son of the Father, but also a transformation of the meaning of baptism.
- The Holy Spirit would not actually descend upon the followers of Jesus until Pentecost, after he had risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, for it was only then that his Earthly work was completed.
- But Christian baptism is like the baptism of Jesus, in that it involves the descent and indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which transforms us from within and guides us, so that we grow in taking on the nature of Christ.
- Christian Baptism transforms us from merely natural creatures into children of God, in whom God's spirit dwells.
- Jesus, however, had been in communion with the Father and the Spirit since before the beginning of the world.
- Baptism manifested who Jesus is, but baptism did not transform him.
- Rather, it's the other way around: Jesus, in being baptized, transformed baptism.
- In the same way, the waters did not cleanse Jesus – rather, it was Jesus who cleansed and sanctified the waters.
- Similarly, we bless and sanctify the water in the font before we baptize people today.
- Of course, if you'd taken the water of the Jordan that day to a chemist, or you took the water we use in our own baptisms, it would still be H₂O.
- But spiritually, it becomes something more – it becomes the living water that God offers in Christ, which brings not only forgiveness of sins but everlasting life.
- That is why we speak of it as “holy water” – and in Catholic and Orthodox churches it is preserved and used for blessings.

- Just as the bread and wine of the Eucharist are still physically bread and wine, yet become for us something more – the Body and Blood of Christ – so also the water that is blessed in the Rite of Baptism remains water but becomes for us something more, the sacramental instrument through which our sins are washed away, and we become children of God and brothers and sisters to one another in Christ.
- And so today's Gospel tells not only of a miracle, but of a great and holy mystery – indeed of the sacramental mystery of baptism.
- A sacrament is sometimes defined as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual reality.”
- In Jesus' baptism, this was also confirmed outwardly by the Father and the Spirit.
- In our own baptisms, the spiritual transformation is hidden from our view.
- But Jesus, the one who was without sin, underwent the Baptism of John and received the Holy Spirit on our behalf...
- That the waters in which we are baptized might be purified and transformed into living water because he passed through them before us
- He who had been with the Father and the Holy Spirit from the beginning had the Holy Spirit descend upon him in a form others could see so that in our baptisms we might receive that same Holy Spirit, and thereby have God dwell within us, as Christ is in the Father and the Father is in Him.
- The sinless one went down into the waters of the Jordan and purified the waters.
- We go down into the waters of baptism and our sins are washed away.
- He came up from the waters of baptism, and the Father testified that this was his co-Eternal Son.

- We go into the waters of baptism as creatures of flesh, made in the image of God, and come up as something more, as God's own children by adoption.
- Christ came up from the waters and the Holy Spirit, with whom He had dwelt alongside the Father since before Creation, descended upon Him in visible form.
- We come up and are anointed with oil, and the Holy Spirit comes and dwells within our hearts.
- Christ, the source of light and life, entered the Jordan waters to transform the waters of baptism into the gateway to everlasting life.
- We, in passing through baptism, enter into this new and everlasting life in Him.
- Having been baptized, Christ went out into the wilderness to be tempted.
- We, being baptized, are given the power in Christ to overcome the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil.
- Having been baptized, Jesus began to preach the Good News of the Kingdom of God.
- Through baptism, we have passed over from the kingdoms of this world into the Kingdom of God, and to us has been entrusted the proclamation, through word and example, of the Good News of God in Jesus Christ.
- And so, on this holy day, let us remember our own baptisms, through which came our reconciliation with God, our salvation from sin and death, and our entry into the Kingdom of God and the communion of all believers.
- And let us also remember our baptismal vows: to follow Christ, to obey Him, and to bring his Good News of reconciliation to the whole world.