

Epiphany Sunday, January 10, 2021

Good morning, and welcome to the first Sunday in Epiphany.

We're only 10 days into the New Year and already it's shaping up to be quite a ride!

I don't know about you, but many of the Christmas greetings we received had hand-written notes acknowledging people were looking forward to starting a new year.

I took these to be signs of optimism, that is, until I read a quote on Facebook. It went something like this:

"Dear Manufacturer,

Please accept this return of services for 2021. I believe I am well within my 14-day trial period in asking for a refund and am returning it in close to its original condition, without visible signs of use. However, I have already experienced enough to know I'm no longer interested in this product!

Thank you for your prompt attention to my request."

Well, I hope that doesn't describe how you're feeling! The season of Epiphany should be one of hope and light. So, let's see if we can find reason for rejoicing as we move into today's scripture.

The word Epiphany comes from Greek and means "manifestation". It has been celebrated since the 4th century and is most often associated with the visit of the Magi to Christ in Bethlehem.

The Gospel of Matthew says the three kings followed a star across the desert to Bethlehem, much like the nighttime phenomenon many of us were lucky enough to witness this December. They came bearing gifts of gold to represent his royalty, frankincense for his divinity, and myrrh for his mortality.

In the Spanish speaking world Epiphany, known as Dia de los Reyes, and is held on January 6. In Mexico, crowds gather to taste the Rosca de Reyes - Kings' bread. And in some countries, a Baby Jesus figurine is hidden in the bread. Whoever finds him throws a party in February for Candlemas, or the feast of presentation.

And, evidently, Epiphany also marks the time when we are all supposed to remove any Christmas decorations from our houses. I have to confess I'm a little tardy with that task...

Well, the Magi followed the star, and in celebrating Epiphany we recognize the light of God at work in the world, which is so beautifully described in our reading from Genesis:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was void and darkness covered the face of the deep. God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and He separated the light from the darkness.”

Those who have stumbled through the inky black depths of a cave or gotten turned around in a dark forest at nighttime know the power of a single beam of light can make all the difference to finding the way home.

So light is good and powerful, but it is also revelatory. We associate light with the dawning of understanding, with recognition, comprehension, clarity. And during the season of Epiphany, we celebrate the revelation of Jesus as God incarnate, Immanuel, God with us.

Our gospel reading today highlights God’s revelation through the voice of John the Baptist, whose preaching ended a centuries long drought of Jewish prophesy. You see, God’s voice had been silent since the time of Malachi, but that silence was broken to pave the way for the ministry of Christ in the world.

And John’s voice, crying out in the wilderness, spurred people to repent. The Bible tells us that people came from all over Judea and Jerusalem to listen, drawn like moths to a flame. You see, after several hundred years of silence, they were thirsty for God’s voice. and as they listened, their hearts caught fire with a heat that could only be relieved by baptism in the river.

Now, I believe there is something inside each of us that knows when things are not quite right, that help us sense when something is “off” in our lives. And even though we have a tendency to adjust to that sensation, I also believe that, eventually, there’s a growing ache inside of us that can’t be squelched.

And this thirst to be made “right” is universal. It transcends countries and languages and geographical barriers. The Bible uses the term “justified” to describe this realigning of our character, our actions, and our hearts with God; and justification takes more than human willpower. It takes Jesus; it takes the Holy Spirit.

Throughout Acts, the Apostles reinforce the importance of baptism as a visible sign of this justification. You remember that on the day of Pentecost, when Peter had finished addressing the crowds, their hearts were burning; they needed action – ‘What shall we **do**?’

Peter’s response echoes John’s message: “Repent”, he said, “and be baptized each one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.”

Today’s New Testament reading reinforces the validity of baptism as a litmus test for belief.

For when Paul came across this small group of believers in Ephesus, he watched how they were living and listened to what they were saying. Then he asked a diagnostic question: “Into what, then, were you baptized?”

Their response identified the problem – they had heard John’s message and responded with changed hearts. But they were missing something critical; there was repentance, yes; and there was forgiveness. But stuck in a cycle of rinse and repeat, there was no power, no abundance, no filling.

And when Paul pointed out to them that they were missing critical “next steps” in their faith, they responded with open hearts. “‘John baptized with the baptism of repentance,’ said Paul, ‘telling people to believe in the one who was to come after him. That one is Jesus’.

Paul spoke with authority because he himself had been transformed by the power of Christ. And as he spoke, his words touched the hearts of the Ephesians, resonating deeply within.

The Bible tells us that, much like those who heard Peter’s words at Pentecost, the Ephesian believers were moved to action. Paul baptized them in the name of Christ. Then, moments later, as he laid his hands on them and prayed for them, these men and women were filled with the Holy Spirit, just as had happened with the apostles.

This one moment changed their lives forever. And, as we have learned throughout the history of the church, a small group of believers united in purpose and serving God in love can impact the world.

As humans, we too long for and respond to the power of light. John said it this way: ‘The one who is coming after me is more powerful. I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’”

It’s the Holy Spirit who provides us with the power to walk in lives worthy of baptism, like John and Peter and Paul and the Ephesians.

Light. Revelation. Power. Hope.

Epiphany reminds us that Christ is more than a baby in the manger. He is Emmanuel, God the Son, dwelling here with us. And today’s lessons remind us that we are not alone – because we have the Holy Spirit, helping us, filling us with power to do the work God calls us to do and to be the people He calls us to be.

Dear church, our world is changing. Things which we once thought were firm can be shaken; and the life we have become accustomed to will be disrupted.

But God does not leave us to face these things alone. The Holy Spirit provides light for the journey and strength for the day.

During this season, may our hearts be aligned with God’s will and may our lives reflect His grace to those around us. Amen.