

January 10, 2021

Good morning! Welcome to stay at home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, MD. I am Pastor Scott Robinson and today we welcome Tom Johnson, Alice Fleishman and Mike Broderick, who are providing special music. Hopefully before too long we can worship in person again. Meanwhile if you would like to help support our ministries and benevolence commitments, you can donate through our web site or Facebook page. Now today's stupid joke.

I told you a pastor friend of mine is finishing her first Advent-Christmas and now Epiphany seasons in a new call to what appears to be a difficult congregation. She caught a bad cold over New Year's, and briefly ended up in the hospital with Pneumonia. She says her Council President called her to say, "Your Congregational Council and I wish you a speedy and complete recovery." She said, "Thank you so much!" And he said, "The vote was eight to five."

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us Pray. Father in heaven, at the Baptism of Jesus at the Jordan River you proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit. Make all who are Baptized into Christ faithful in their calling to be your children and inheritors with him of everlasting life; through your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

A reading from Genesis, the first chapter. In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Mark, the first chapter.

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany, which officially ended the season of Christmas in the church calendar. So yes, it's okay now to take the tree and decorations down. But this has been a difficult and at times depressing year, so Laura and I plan to keep celebrating for a while. We need all the joy we can get.

Epiphany and the short season that follows it first appeared in the Christian calendar in the mid 4th century. It began as a single-day commemoration of the visit of Matthew's Magi, or Wise Men, to the Bethlehem house of Joseph and Mary to see their royal child and give him gifts.

The word Epiphany comes from the Greek word *epi faneia*, which means "appearance" or "manifestation." In English epiphany has come to mean the sudden revelation of a profound reality of which one was previously unaware.

Epiphanies can entail extraordinary insights, often triggered by things remarkably ordinary. The epiphany of the magi came about when the significance of Jesus was revealed in a star.

Christmas, or the nativity of Christ, was largely ignored by the early church. It was eventually incorporated into Epiphany, and only later became its own festival.

The first Sunday after the Epiphany is set aside every year as the Feast Day of the Baptism of the Lord, although that hasn't been so for very long. Jesus' Baptism was historically celebrated as yet another part of the January 6th celebration of Epiphany. It wasn't until 1955 that the Catholic Church decided Jesus' Baptism was important enough to merit its own festival.

Lutherans and Episcopalians quickly agreed. Methodists, Presbyterians and American Baptists eventually did too. And it's funny, because to the early church, Jesus' Baptism is something they probably would rather have swept under the carpet than lifted up for celebration.

Jesus' Baptism is one of the very few events described in all four Gospels, so even the most skeptical have to admit that it probably really happened. Not just because of its so-called multiple attestation, but because it was likely an embarrassment to the early church and therefore not the sort of thing anyone would have made up.

Why an embarrassment? Because as we read this morning, John announced his Baptism was for repentance and the forgiveness of sins. If Jesus, Son of God, Messiah was free of sin, as most Christians insist, he needed no repentance, and certainly no forgiveness. So why in the heck would HE be Baptized?

Catholic Priest and biblical scholar John Meier says that by the time the gospels were written there were probably at least as many people convinced that John the Baptist had been the Messiah and not Jesus. The Book of Acts appears to back that up, as do the writings of Jewish historian Josephus. Meier imagined those John folks were fiercely competitive with the Christians, maybe even taunting them, saying things like, "Our messiah baptized your messiah."

Maybe that's why John's account of this event never actually says Jesus was baptized. Luke admits he was, but then makes it clear it was NOT by John. Matthew includes a whole conversation between the two of them in which John admits he wasn't worthy to baptize Jesus—it should be the other way around. Sure, in the end it happened, but only because Jesus insisted.

Scholars suspect the gospel authors ALL felt the need not just to put John IN the Jesus story, but also to put him in his place. Over time, Christianity obviously won-out over John-ism.

And today over two-billion Christians in more than 38,000 denominations worldwide profess the importance of Baptism, even though very few of those groups see eye-to-eye on exactly what makes it so important, or even how baptism is supposed to be accomplished. Some folks insist you have to be dunked to be baptized. Others think dipping or sprinkling is just fine.

Some will tell you you can't get to heaven UNLESS you are baptized, even though no such claim is made in the Bible; and many seem to think the day they asked to be baptized was the day they were saved. Some Fundamentalists I know will tell you the exact date, time and place if you ask. (Or more often, if you don't.) Those folks say that infants and small children CAN'T really BE baptized, because they don't yet have faith enough to ask for it.

We Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans and Catholics say that's not right. As both Martin Luther and John Calvin insisted, salvation is by God's grace, through faith freely given. It is NOT be dependent on ANTHING we do or don't do, including Baptism. The EXACT DAY and time we were saved was about three o'clock in the afternoon on Good Friday, around two thousand years ago, at a place called Golgotha. To believe otherwise would only tend to diminish Christ's accomplishment.

All in all, it seems a shame that the sacraments of Baptism and Communion, both given to the Church by Christ to unite us in our faith, too often these days serve only to divide us.

So the question I've been struggling with all week is what, if any role, Baptism might still play to help unite Christians of all

denominations, as originally intended? And then I had an epiphany.

I was lucky enough in my years at Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg to study Systematic Theology and Church History under a professor named Gunther Gassmann. He was a kindly and quite scholarly visiting professor from Germany, who I have mentioned before. I was honored to call him friend.

Dr. Gassmann, along with a couple of other professors and I got together one evening a week most weeks to solve all the world's problems, which we discovered was best accomplished in the pub down the street. I did more listening than talking.

Gunther, in his earlier days organized and chaired the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches. That was a group that spent years studying, and deliberating and then writing a book that focused mostly on those things that SHOULD unite the Church rather than DIVIDE it. When it comes to uniting the church through Baptism, Gunther both figuratively and literally, pretty much wrote the book. Amazon .com credits some fifteen books to Dr. Gassmann. I'd like to credit him today for the one I am talking about, perhaps his shortest and easiest to read.

The book is Called Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, and today I thought I should share some of its insights. The book first points out that Christian Baptism is rooted in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, who commanded the practice for all of his Church. Regardless of whether you are dunked, dipped or sprinkled, as an infant, pre-teen or as an adult, Baptism is first and foremost an act of incorporation into the community of believers—the Church--the body of Christ--and therefore into the New Covenant between God and God's people made through Jesus Christ.

In Baptism we symbolically participate in Christ's death, trusting that in doing so, we will also participate in his resurrection. Baptism represents not only a new birth from above, but also a renewal in the Spirit. It is more a new beginning, than an end in itself.

Baptism marks an exodus from our bondage to sin and liberation into a new humanity in which barriers of division by gender or race or social standing are transcended. It unites us with Christ, and puts us, a wonderfully diverse collection of human beings, on equal footing with each other.

Our Baptism transforms and prepares us for the new relationship of love and forgiveness among our faith community and with our God. Baptism also introduces us into a new reality of compassion and understanding intended for the family of all of God's people, regardless of where, or even if, they go to church.

Baptism is an act of God, not an act of ministers or individuals. There's no way for people to get it wrong, because God always gets it right. These days at St. Mark's, parents, sponsors, families and our entire congregation fully participate by pledging a solemn oath that we will help to incorporate the newly Baptized into the Church, where they will learn the saving faith God has promised through God's grace.

These are points on which all Christians certainly can and should agree, from Pope Francis to Calvin to Wesley to Luther. So thank you again my now late friend Gunther.

Ironically, a few years ago while writing another sermon on the Baptism of Jesus, I decided to try to contact Dr. Gassmann, to see if he had any new insights into Baptism. He retired shortly after I graduated, moved back to Switzerland and we had lost touch.

I knew that Jacques, one of his sons, was an artist in Paris and I found his website. I asked for contact information for his father, and a couple of days later, I got an email. Not from Jacques, but from his father. Who stuck by all his conclusions about Baptism from decades ago. And then thanked me for bringing back fond memories of our years in Gettysburg. I later learned Dr. Gunther Gassmann died peacefully shortly after sending me that email. At home with his wife Ulla in Geneva, at the age of 85.

I also read where Gunther had been in Rome several years after his retirement, spearheading yet another Lutheran-Catholic ecumenical dialogue. Not surprised.

Even in retirement, his life's work of fostering human equality, mutual respect and Christian unity, never ceased. Hopefully, ours won't either.

Amen.