

January 8, 2012

First Sunday after the Epiphany

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May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be ever acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany. Some people find the seasons of the church year are a mystery. We know Advent is a time of preparation for the birth of our Lord at Christmas; and we know that Lent is a time of preparation for the passion and resurrection. The season of Pentecost represents the life of the church after the resurrection by encouraging the faithful to live a holy life as we reflect on many examples of the life of Jesus . . . so what's with Epiphany?

Do you remember the meaning of the word, epiphany? Literally epiphany means "manifestation," and sometimes it is translated as "appearance." Theologically, we might be happier with the word "revelation" – that which is revealed, or made known, made clear, perhaps even that which is now made obvious. Hold that word "obvious" in the back of your mind. We'll come back to what is obvious in a few minutes.

One theologian put it this way – this is the season to celebrate that "Jesus went public" in his ministry. To that end, the season focuses on events, teaching and miracles which reveal God's purpose in Jesus.

If we travel back in time and across cultures and arrive in Egypt at the end of the second century, we would find Christians celebrating the baptism of Jesus on January 6th. Egyptian Christians celebrated how Jesus is revealed as God's own to a much wider audience than we had at the manger in Bethlehem. In the Gospel lesson for this morning we have riverbanks were full of people hanging on every word and action of John the Baptist. On that day, everybody was in for a big surprise – Jesus truly had gone public – there was the Spirit of God as a dove and those words: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

In addition to the whole idea of baptism, the Egyptians also linked up another tradition which has to do with the first miracle of Jesus soon after his baptism . . . you remember that miracle?

This first miracle of Jesus which had to do with changing the water into wine at a wedding has a connection to the feast dedicated to the Egyptian sun god, to be celebrated with light, water and wine on January 6. Why January 6th is a good question . . . the Egyptian winter solstice was dated for January 6, so Egyptian Christians easily adapted their ancient celebration of light, water and wine to recognize the water into wine miracle of Jesus at Cana of Galilee. Epiphany is often identified as a season of light – the light of Christ being brought into a dark world; baptism with the water and wine with the Cana miracle. The parallels with Egyptian tradition are unmistakable.

In addition, we also discover that not only are the Egyptians celebrating on January 6, but everybody who was influenced by Greek culture was also throwing a party. The Greeks held celebrations for Dionysius, the god of wine, at the same time of year.

Why are the Egyptian and the Greek traditions important to Christians? We could say that the convergence of these traditions is kind of interesting historically and in the development of Christian tradition. But I think there is more to it than that.

On the one hand, the Savior's message of forgiveness, eternal life, and loving others as yourself may be very foreign concepts to Egyptians and Greeks. A life of prayer, self-sacrifice and faith in God – God whom you cannot see – is difficult to grasp, let alone take seriously.

On the other hand, this story about the wine provides some common ground for discussion among those of diverse cultural and spiritual perspectives. And in those connections are opportunities for the Holy Spirit to change hearts and bring new revelation of faith, new manifestations of God's love – to bring epiphany, if you pardon the expression, to bring epiphany to those with ears to hear. So, we have yet another theme for Epiphany, that of sharing the good news among others, both far and near.

Which brings us to the third tradition associated with the feast of the Epiphany -- the wise men. After their adventures with King Herod, the star and their visit to Bethlehem, they travel back to their home in the east, rejoicing with the angels and the shepherds about the birth of the Savior of the world. In the revelation to the wise men of the birth of Jesus, it is fair to assume that they shared this good news along the way.

Their caravan would have traveled well established trade routes back to Persia and they would most likely swap tales of their life-changing experience with fellow travelers they met along the way. Their stories and their journey represent telling the good news to the whole world. We might see the magi as the first evangelists telling their tales of the new things God has declared as the former things have come to pass around campfires in the middle of the desert.

Now, I asked you to keep the word "obvious" in the back of your mind. Let's put that word to good use.

It has been revealed; it is obvious, isn't it, that the world is in desperate need of accepting God's love. It is obvious, isn't it, that cultural and spiritual divisions exist and must be bridged. It is obvious, isn't it, that faithful people of good will need to swap stories of miracles and inspire one another to a life-style of love and reconciliation with every breath we take. It is obvious, isn't it, that your actions and mine as Christians speak louder than any words we have to say. So, it is obvious, isn't it, that how you and I spend our time, how you and I spend our money, how you and I speak of others, how you and I treat one another; the example you and I set, speaks volumes about the integrity of the faith we say is so important to us. It is obvious, then, that others will be attracted to faith, in part, based upon your example and mine.

The good news of Epiphany is found in bringing the light of Christ into places of spiritual darkness; bringing the water of baptism to those who thirst for God; sharing wine in a celebration of thanksgiving for God's great gift in Jesus; and revealing to others what a life in Christ looks like, through people like you and me.

It all seems so perfectly obvious.

In the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.