

EPIPHANIES AND BAPTISMS

January 12, 2010

By Dane Perry

We have entered the season of Epiphany, which, as you know, takes its initial inspiration from the journey of the Magi as they followed the star to the place of Jesus' birth and the revelation or manifestation of God's incarnation. The Gospel texts of this season highlight the continuing revelations of God's Spirit working through Jesus.

This morning's text focuses our attention on another epiphany that took place immediately before the beginning of Jesus's ministry. As a prelude to his journey into the wilderness, Jesus visits his cousin John to be baptized.

Scholars have spilt gallons of ink discussing Jesus's decision to be baptized since he had no need for forgiveness. I think it is more helpful to view the baptism of Jesus as his affirmation and commission from God for the ministry to which he has been called. His baptism provides the identity that will give shape to his ministry, and, I would believe, provides an identity for us as well at our own baptisms.

Jesus's affirmation is conveyed in his experience of hearing God's voice say, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Or, in a paraphrase that I like from Eugene Peterson's version in *The Message*: "This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, the delight of my life." What a remarkable comment to hear from one's parent!

Many folks think that, as the Son of God, Jesus already knew who he was and already had the confidence to carry out his mission. But I'm not so sure.

As fully human, Jesus would experience the feelings and emotions that come with being human. He would know fear, doubt and uncertainty in his discernment of identity and call. His baptism and God's subsequent affirmation would be an epiphany for him of who he was and what God was calling him to do, a moment that would stay with him forever, an epiphany giving him strength, courage, confidence and the conviction to fulfill God's calling.

Likewise, our own baptism provides us with the identity and affirmation as people who have chosen to follow Jesus. Our own baptismal epiphany is a revelation that we too are God's beloved sons and daughters with whom God is well pleased. The whole ministry of Jesus was dedicated to communicating just this simple yet undeniable reality: We are God's delight!

How is it, then, that the true significance of this truth so often escapes us? In his book, *Life of the Beloved*, Henri Nouwen suggests that it is difficult to hear the voice that reminds us that we are God's beloved in a world where other voices are always shouting at us, telling us that we are unlovable or not good enough. Nouwen asserts that we are to live our lives based on the knowledge that we are the beloved sons and daughters of God. Yet other voices tempt us to define our lives against God's affirmation and thereby lead us into the trap of self-rejection.

One voice suggests that I am what I do. I am what I have done is another way of putting it. We can sit back and look at family photos or trophies and be content at raising children, getting married, or doing something impressive. This is satisfying for a time until those relationships break down, family members die, and achievements are bested or forgotten.

Another voice offers that I am what others say about me. Nouwen notes that this is a powerful voice because it can drive relationships and vocations. If someone says nice things about me, then job security is maintained, relationships are maintained, people want me and want to be with me. When people speak poorly of me, however, those words cut deep and severely wound my psyche.

A third voice proposes that I am what I have. The materialism of our world makes this claim very powerful. This voice is also tied to one's personality and identity. I am what my nationality determines, whom I am related to, the kind of personality I have, my sexuality, my political identity, as well as the things I own. Yet when we lose family, lose friends or things or have doubts about our worth and identity, we can often slip into despair.

The world's voices are all lies. The claims of what I do, what people say, and what I have are entirely wrong, yet they are pervasive in almost every society. Even Jesus himself confronts these three voices in the wilderness.

In the wilderness the Tempter's voice seductively urges Jesus: Turn these stones into bread and become a spectacular miracle worker—after all, we are what we do. Throw yourself off of the temple roof and people will say great things about you—after all, we are what people say and think of us. Bow down to me in exchange for all these kingdoms and everything and everyone will be yours—after all, we are what we have.

Jesus's baptism is the root of his identity: the beloved Son of God in whom the Father is well pleased. And with that assurance, he can resist the Tempter and endure the hatred of the world, even a death on the cross.

Henri Nouwen writes, "Over the years, I have come to realize that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity or power, but self-rejection. Success, popularity and power can, indeed, present a great temptation, but their seductive quality often comes from the way they are a part of the much larger temptation to self-rejection. When we believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity, and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions."

If only we could move beyond the sense of insecurity and unworthiness that often drive us and could actually learn to trust the fact that we are loved unconditionally by God who positively delights in us, we would see a remarkable transformation in the world around us. Imagine experiencing love and acceptance as naturally as the air that we breathe.

Perhaps we can learn from Martin Luther. When he faced temptations, doubted himself, endured depression or felt like giving up, he placed his hand on top of his head and repeated over and over, in Latin: "Baptizatus sum, baptizatus sum," which means, "I am baptized." Remembering his

baptism reminded him that, come what may, I am beloved and pleasing to God. Remembering his baptism gave him the faith, courage and resolve to allow God's love to transform himself and the world around him.

Now, I realize that not many of us spend a whole lot of time reflecting upon our own baptism. Some of us can't even remember the experience because we were baptized as infants. But it is worth the time occasionally--or daily--to reflect upon and reclaim the meaning of our baptism whenever it took place. Our baptism reminds us of the indisputable truth that we are God's beloved, God's sons and daughters with whom God is well pleased.

And it is this affirmation that is the bedrock of our identity as Christian people, a foundation of trust and confidence in the fact that we are loved, included and accepted by God. And rest assured there is nothing can ever take away God's delight in us— not even the neurotic and narcissistic culture surrounding us.

Recently I read about a Twelve Step meeting where the group was discussing concepts about their "Higher Power." A rugged, hard living old guy who had been sober for almost 35 years said, "I don't know about you, but my God is crazy about me."

That's the kind of love heaven cannot contain. And yet we often find it so hard to believe in such love, so hard to be God's beloved.

If only, if only we would grasp how much loving us pleases a God who is crazy about us.