

The First Sunday after the Epiphany: Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ  
January 7, 2018  
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Genesis 1:1-5  
Psalm 29  
Acts 19:1-7  
Mark 1:4-11

How quickly Jesus grows up!

There's a part of me that always feels this way this time of year. And it's always a bit of a shock for me at how quickly Christmas is over.

As we go through the seasons of the church year, we spend a few weeks getting ready for Christmas. Even before the old liturgical year ends, the readings call on us to take stock of the times in which we live. They warn us. And they invite us to look for the One who is coming to judge all that is wrong with this world and then to make all things right again.

In Advent, perhaps we put up an Advent calendar at home – or even color it in – to count the days. Here in church, we hang an Advent Wreath – and light candles – to count the weeks.

And then, at last, it's Christmas.

And then, all of a sudden, Christmas is over. Jesus is grown up. The Christmas tree at home has been dragged to the curb.

It's always a bit of a shock, as I say.

And perhaps that's especially true this year. Some of us gathered here for our Epiphany potluck last evening. We remembered the Magi who followed a star in search of the infant king ... and considered their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. We received stars of our own, as a gift for us to consider for ourselves in the year ahead.

But that was last night. This morning, the infant Jesus is a full-grown man.

As Mark tells it, though, that was always the place to start. Matthew and Luke begin with the old familiar Christmas; Mark begins with John the baptizer and Jesus being baptized.

It's no small point for us to note. Luke tells us of an old woman and a young maiden and their unexpected pregnancies. Luke goes on to tell us of Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem to be registered for the census tax, and giving birth to Jesus there, but having to lay the newborn baby in a manger because there was no room for them in an inn. And Luke tells us of angels surprising shepherds in that same region with "good news of great joy," and how the shepherds would go to see for themselves. And Luke goes on to tell us that the shepherds told the new parents all that had been told to them ... and that Mary pondered all of it.

Matthew tells us of Joseph, a righteous man who decided to quietly divorce Mary when she “was found to be with child” until an angel explained it all to him in a dream. Matthew goes on to tell us of the Magi who followed a star in search of the infant king ... and of their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. And Matthew tells us of how they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, but to return to their homes by another road, and of how Herod became so infuriated that he unleashed a massacre of innocent children. And Matthew goes on to tell us that Joseph was warned in a dream to flee ... so the Holy Family escaped to Egypt.

But Mark doesn't know about Christmas. Or maybe he just doesn't care about the old stories.

My point is that if we're going to hear the story the way Mark tells it, we have to try to let go of Christmas. For unless we call these stories consciously to mind, we will unconsciously hold them in the telling of this story. The way Matthew tells it, somebody must have had to explain why the family spent so much of Jesus' childhood in a foreign land. The way Luke tells it, Mary would surely have told her son about what happened the day he was born ... and Jesus would have known his cousin John (or at least known of him). All of which is to say, he'd have grown up with at least an inkling of who he was and that God had a special plan for him.

But the way Mark tells it, Jesus seems to come along without any special preconceptions. It looks, to me at least, as if he joined the crowds who were being drawn from the whole Judean countryside by John's prophetic call. It looks like Jesus, along with everybody else, wanted to take part in the dawning of a new age to come. And so, like everybody else, he was baptized.

And though there's no hint that Jesus had a clue that something momentous was about to happen to him, his baptism was the stunning moment when everything changed for him:

*... 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."*

At least as Mark tells it, there's no indication that anyone else standing beside the river that day heard or saw anything of what Jesus saw and heard.

We call this season of the church year “Epiphany.” It comes from a word that means an appearance or a manifestation of divinity. We might think of it in terms of the Feast Day itself, and of the Magi who recognize Jesus as divine, or we think more broadly of this whole season of Epiphany, and of the people who respond to Jesus, seeing that spark of the divine in his life and teaching and ministry ... “God in man made manifest,” as the refrain from an old hymn expresses it. Either way, the emphasis is on the divinity of Jesus being manifest to others.

And that's fine. But I wonder if Epiphany had to happen first for Jesus. For him, Epiphany begins when he rises up out of the water and the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit descends on him and a voice tells him things about himself that he may never even had even suspected:

*"You are my my son, the beloved; with you I am well-pleased."*

It would be hard, I think, to overstate what it must have been like for Jesus. But writer Caspar Green offers an imaginative paraphrase I quite like:

*... Jesus came. He arrived from Nazareth and John dunked him in the Jordan River. As he emerged from the water he saw the universe as it really is, and he felt it resonate to his core: that he was God's precious child, and God was joy.*

That moment – that ecstatic, mystical moment of clarity – is as close as Mark ever gets to telling us a Christmas story. It's the story that tells Jesus – and us – who Jesus is. And everything that follows flows out of this core identity.

There were no gifts from Magi in this Christmas story, but Jesus' baptism was a gift – the first given to Jesus ... and worth more to him, I think, than much fine gold. And though there were no angels announcing good news to shepherds, nor shepherds to pass the story on to Mary, the voice must have given Jesus words to ponder for the rest of his life among us. For in all that he said, Jesus tried to tell us of God's love. And in all that he did, Jesus tried to show us that we are, each of us, precious in God's sight ... and that God was joy.

Christmas is over ... all too abruptly perhaps. But there is still at least this gift for us to open, and we would do well to spend time in the effort of opening this gift.

That's why on this day when we remember Jesus' baptism, we consider our own as well. The hope is that when we rise up from worship this day, we will have heard for ourselves a word God speaks to us, as well, the same as the one spoken to Jesus at his baptism:

*"You are my daughter, my son, my beloved; with you I am well-pleased."*

Caspar Green puts it this way:

Baptism might just get you wet. Or it might just change your life.

... Whether or not there was any water involved at the moment it happened, your baptism is when you realized who you are at your very core *and* you accepted that realization with joy. So much joy, that as difficult as it may have been (and still be), it's impossible not to live the rest of your life out of that moment.<sup>i</sup>

If Christmas ends abruptly, let it end with this last first gift. And may we treasure its worth, surpassing that of gold. If we delight in beholding the divine spark we see in Jesus, may we also delight in beholding it in one another and reflected in the mirror as we behold ourselves. And may we never tire of showing one another that we are, each of us, precious in God's sight ... and that God is joy. And then Christmas may carry on for a while longer, and it may be merry, indeed – not just for a season but throughout the year. And for all the years of our lives.

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<sup>i</sup> Caspar Green @ <http://scarletterbible.com/real-baptism/>.