

The First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Year C  
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD  
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL  
January 9, 2022  
Isaiah 43: 1-7  
Psalm 29  
Acts 8:14-17  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

## Beloved

Happy Epiphany!

On Thursday, January 6, we officially commenced the season of Epiphany, which we will celebrate from now until Ash Wednesday, March 2. That means almost two more months of a season of feasting: celebrating that God is with us and among us and reflecting on all the ways that God in Christ has been and is being made manifest.

Epiphany is sometimes understood as a synonym of *Eureka*, literally, “I have found it” in Greek, as in, “And then I had an epiphany.” The sense is that someone had a real “aha!” moment, a new understanding or insight.

This is certainly part of what this season helps us to understand: Wow, God made manifest in human form. Can you wrap your brain around it? Probably not. God among us. Amazing. It's a season of fresh radiance.

New calendar year. New season. Fresh radiance. Beginning again. In that spirit, there's an ancient Christian practice, still practiced in many places in Europe and elsewhere, of chalking the door and blessing the house.

Ideally, the chalking and blessing are done on Epiphany Day, January 6, but anytime during Epiphany season is appropriate. The house blessing is a very old one; it's found in our Book of Occasional Services.

The chalking is the writing upon the main entrance of your dwelling or domicile the numbers of the year and the letters C, M, B. CMB is the abbreviation of the Latin *Christus mansionem benedicat*: “May Christ bless this house.”

You can chalk your own door. Today for those of you here in person you may pick up a piece on your way out. If you want to chalk your own door, please do. For those of you who are streaming, I'm sorry we can't get chalk to you literally, but you can get chalk and chalk your own door wherever you are. And as I mentioned

in my column in *The Epistle* this past week, don't worry if you ask me to come and chalk your door and bless your house somewhere in Key West or the Lower Keys that I'm going to be put out because I have to drive around. It will be my pleasure and privilege to do that. So, let me know, and we'll set it up. You don't have to be a member of St Paul's either. Let me know, and we'll set it up.

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This season of Epiphany spans eight Sundays and leads us to recall multiple instances in scripture of people gaining insight or revelation concerning who Jesus the Christ is. We just sang about all of them, if you were listening as you were singing our processional hymn; all these times, all these places, all these encounters in which Jesus the Christ is revealed to be God made manifest.

Particularly, we recall three of these: the visit of the magi ("the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles") as we heard last Sunday and last Thursday; the baptism of Jesus by John in the river Jordan, which we've heard about today; and Jesus' first sign in the gospel of John, turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana. That's next week.

On the third and fourth Sundays of this season, we'll hear about people in Jesus' hometown of Nazareth discovering things about him, and about their responses.

On the fifth Sunday of Epiphany, we'll hear about how Simon Peter, who has already met and become acquainted with Jesus, comes to understand that Jesus the Christ is not only a healer but also a profound teacher of wisdom who lives in intimate relationship with God.

On the sixth and seventh Sundays of Epiphany, we'll hear again how Jesus teaches very old texts and truths in ways that sound amazingly new and fresh; good news that people can hear in their particular situations, disclosing to the great crowds gathered around him the wisdom of God with which he is anointed.

And on the last Sunday of Epiphanytide, we'll hear about the transfiguration of Jesus the Christ high on a mountaintop in Galilee in the presence of Peter, James, and John—and Moses and Elijah. What does it mean to be *trans*-figured?

But today, on this first Sunday of Epiphany season, we commemorate the baptism of Jesus by his cousin John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, in the Jordan River.

Lots of people were going down to the Jordan, literally down, down, down, from Jerusalem and elsewhere down below sea level, to the wilderness of Judea, to listen to John's preaching and be baptized.

As we explored during Advent, John's baptism was a baptism of repentance with water for the forgiveness of sins. It was an open-air mikveh bath in the river to which all kinds of people, both Jews and Gentiles, could and did come. Tax collectors. Soldiers. Regular folks. Religious leaders. Anyone. Everyone.

John is preaching as well as baptizing. People ask and he tells them how they should live to show forth fruits worthy of repentance. The message is that repentance means changing our way of living. It isn't remorse; it isn't regret. It's change; changing behavior, amending our life.

Many people think John might be the Messiah. He says, *Nope, not me. I am not. But there's one coming after me. I'm preparing the way for him, for the Messiah, the Anointed One. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*

And then Jesus shows up. To be baptized. Like everybody else. In other gospels, his cousin John the Baptizer hesitates. In Matthew's gospel, John tries to talk him out of it, saying, *I shouldn't baptize you; you should baptize me.* Jesus says, *Baptize me, John.*

Luke's gospel, as we've just heard, says all these people are there being baptized and Jesus is one of them. And when Jesus comes up out of the water and is praying, the Holy Spirit descends upon him in bodily form like that of a dove.

John's gospel says there was a voice from heaven that many people thought was thunder, and some in the crowd thought was the voice of an angel.

Luke says a voice came from heaven, saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." It's a bit unclear if anyone else understood the message, but, for sure, Jesus did.

The Spirit descended in a form like a dove: it was visible. A voice came from heaven: it was audible.

This is the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke.

It was Jesus' baptism, but it was not the same as the sacrament of baptism as we now understand it and practice it and as Aubrey is preparing for at Easter Vigil. Many things about it, however, carry over to our practice of baptism as a sacrament.

For Jesus, the baptism of John served as a rite of initiation. It began something new.

In Luke's gospel, after receiving the Spirit and hearing God's blessing of belovedness, Jesus immediately goes into the wilderness where he will fast and pray and be tested for forty days and forty nights. And after this time of preparation, initiated by his baptism, he will begin his public ministry.

We still speak of the sacrament of baptism as a rite of initiation. It is the formal inauguration of our lives as Christians, as Christ followers. It marks us in a profound way as children of God. We understand that by it we are cleansed from sin, from inadequacy, from brokenness, and that it incorporates, it literally takes us into the body of Christ as never before as God's children.

At the baptism of Jesus, God speaks words of blessing and favor. Jesus the Christ hears in an empowering and lifechanging way that he is beloved of God.

The same message of belovedness is ours, at and through our baptism, and beyond it because of God's saving and restoring work in and through Christ on our behalf.

A sacrament makes visible an invisible reality. It is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. In the sacrament of baptism, we are revealed to be even more fully who we already are—God's beloved children.

In the sacrament of baptism as we practice it, after being baptized with water in the name of the Holy Trinity, we are smeared with oil. This is the meaning of anointing, literally. It is the literal meaning of Messiah or Christ, *one smeared with oil*.

The beautiful balsam aroma of sacred chrism is slathered on our foreheads in the sign of the cross and over us and to us are said these words, beginning with our own chosen names. In my case, Donna Susan, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.

This declaration of belovedness was from God for Jesus the Christ, God's unique and only begotten Child, and it is also for us. This is the message Jesus came to reveal in ways we could no longer miss seeing, in declarations we could no longer avoid hearing. You are God's beloved. God delights in you. God is pleased with you, children made in God's message.

If you resist this message, you are not alone. We have been resisting it since the beginning.

We have always been denying it, confusing the facts, conflating actions and inactions with personhood. Yes, we make mistakes. Yes, we commit errors. Yes, we miss the mark. Yes, we fall short. Yes, we hurt other people and God's creation. Yes, we need to make amends for evil we have done and for evil done in our name. Yes, we need divine intervention to set things right.

These are all things that we do and need to do. They are not who we are.

Every single person who has ever lived is more, far more, than the worst thing they have ever done.

Jesus came to remind us of that message and to invite us to live as people who know that it is true—true for us and for every other person created in God's image.

It is not that we are perfect and need no assistance. It is that, even though we are imperfect, we can be healed, which is the same thing as being made whole, restored to wholeness.

Yes, we are broken by the changes and chances of this life. But broken is not bad, it's just broken. And God is the source of health and healing and the author of both. This is why Jesus came, so that we would know that God loves us even though we are broken and come to know that God is the Great Physician and has come as the Great Physician in the person of Jesus the Christ to heal us.

In the baptism of Our Lord, which we celebrate today, we celebrate also the gift of the Holy Spirit and the message of divine favor that were for Jesus the Christ and through him are for us as well. We are God's beloved. God looks on us with delight and favor. Let's live like those people. Let's walk in love. Let's be who we are. Let's become what we receive: the body of Christ, broken and given for the world.