

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The First Sunday after Epiphany
January 10, 2010
Luke 3:15-22

“Epiphany Light on A Baptism”

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

We are holding on to the last vestiges of one season and entering fully into another this weekend. In fact, we are combining in our worship two important emphases in the church year. Last Wednesday was Epiphany, January 6th. In recognition of that day, we have kept the Christmas decorations and candles up for this one last Sunday. The lights are a reminder of the season just past and of the Epiphany light. Our first hymns today have also been Epiphany hymns and the hymn of the day which we just sang has a powerful message about the light—“O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright.” The first reading is also from the Epiphany of our Lord, the prophetic words of Isaiah the prophet regarding the light, the kings, and their gifts. The other readings however, would point our attention to the theme of this first Sunday after Epiphany, the Baptism of our Lord as did the opening portion of our worship as we renewed our own baptismal vows. Now is it possible to combine these two emphases? We’re going to give it a try. It is of interest that in the early church the first celebrations of what we would call Christmas were observances of the visit of the Wise Men and Jesus’ baptism. So, let us meditate on the words of our Lord with the theme: Epiphany Light on a Baptism.

I. Epiphany Light

Epiphany is the season of light. The very name means to shine forth in Greek. That is probably fitting since the day has its origins in the star which the wise men saw and then followed to the place where the child was. The star which they had seen rising in the East finally was seen as it came to rest over the house in Bethlehem. The star led the wise men to make a journey—a journey not without hardship—but a journey with great expectation as well. (And we have illustrated it here in church with our nativity display. Our wise men have made the journey from the east side to the west side as well) And of course there is Herod, the jealous king and the scribes who quote the ancient prophet Micah about the birthplace of the one who will shepherd my people Israel. And there are gifts presented—gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. It is a marvelous account is it not? The star, the wise men, the child and the gifts. But as the Old Testament Lesson for today would remind us, it is also the story of the light of the Lord. A light far greater than even the wonder of the star which led them. For in this light the people of God are exhorted to arise and shine. The glory of the Lord would be seen upon them and all the nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn. These words can most assuredly be seen as a prophecy of Epiphany—especially in their mention of the gifts brought. But there is also a wider application to these words for they speak of the bringing of good news, the praises of the Lord. The Epiphany light is for all the nations, for all the peoples of the world. The

Epiphany light shines as it reveals the Child, the Savior, the King in whom the Lord revealed Himself and through whom the glory of the Lord would shine. For the Epiphany light is most simply, Jesus Christ our Lord. And it is in Him as St. Paul writes that we have seen the light of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus.

II. A Baptism

And in that Epiphany light we can see a baptism that shines as well. It is of interest that St. Luke in his Gospel narrates the Baptism of our Lord in a very simple way. It is also worth noting that in the verses about the baptism of Jesus, John the Baptist is not even mentioned. His ministry is summarized in the opening verses of the Gospel as he points to the coming Christ who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. It also relates that John the Baptist would be locked up in prison for his reproving of Herod the tetrarch who took his brother's wife as his own. Then Luke relates the baptism of Jesus—or rather the aftermath of his baptism. “Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son, with You I am well pleased.’” Here is truly and Epiphany event, a showing forth, a revelation. For the Holy Trinity is revealed here. The Father speaks, the Son prays, the Holy Spirit descends as a dove. Dr. Arthur Just in his commentary on Luke's Gospel says: “Jesus now stands as the anointed Messiah, attested by the Father and the Spirit. Jesus begins the new creation. The appearance of the Holy Spirit as a dove recalls Gen. 1 when the Spirit hovered over the water in the first creation. The dove also recalls Noah after the flood.” The Father's word to Jesus is a reminder of the words of Scripture in Psalm 2, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you.” The Lord Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, the Word made flesh, is here anointed for his ministry of salvation. The Lord takes his place among us whom he has come to serve. And in this the love and grace of God is revealed in all its glory. It is truly Epiphany light on a baptism.

III. Our Baptism

Now in all of this there is a very important application in our own baptism. It is appropriate that the Epistle for this week is the words of St. Paul to the Romans which explains our own Baptism in light of the work of Jesus Christ. “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus, have been baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” Here is the powerful image of our dying in Christ and being raised with him. The picture of the Old Adam being drowned and dying as the Small Catechism describes the result of our baptism is very appropriate here. Our sinful selves have been put to death. We have a new life in Christ. The words of the Old Testament lesson echo anew: “Arise, shine, for your light has come...” The ancient Christian hymn quoted by St. Paul also has meaning, “Awake, sleeper, arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” (Ephesians 5:14)

Does it make a difference our new life in Christ? Of course, it does. Do we always show it? No, for the old man must daily be drowned and die. But in our baptisms we are reminded always of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So in a way, though Epiphany has just begun, we look ahead toward Lent, and Holy Week and Easter, toward a cross upon a hill and an empty tomb and a risen Lord. As St. Paul continues, "If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ... We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him."

There could be no better words than these which we speak often at the casket of a loved one who has died in the faith. The victory is ours in our Lord Jesus Christ. The light has come. The light shines indeed and continues to shine. And we, each of us, who have been baptized in Christ Jesus, have that light and that life which lasts forever. The Epiphany light still shines.

What joy to know, when life is past
The Lord we love is first and last
The end and the beginning!
He will one day, oh, glorious grace,
Transport us to that happy place
Beyond all tears and sinning!
Amen! Amen!
Come, Lord Jesus!
Crown of gladness!
We are yearning
For the day of your returning!

In Jesus' Name. Amen.