

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

The Epiphany of our Lord/The Baptism of our Lord
January 8, 2012
Matthew 2:1-12; Mark 1:4-11

“Two for the Price of One”
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

If you saw the theme printed in the bulletin this day, “Two for the Price of One”, please don’t panic thinking that there are going to be two sermons today. No, just one message for today but we are presented with the opportunity to consider the thoughts from the two Gospel readings which were read in the service of the word before. Friday, January 6th was actually the Feast of the Epiphany and this Sunday, the First Sunday after Epiphany is observed as the Baptism of our Lord.

It is of interest that in the origins of Epiphany on the 6th of January, the Eastern Church used the day to celebrate the baptism of Jesus. It is only later in the Western Church that the day began to be associated with the visit of the wise men. So speaking of both those events on one day has some historical precedent. But these Scripture readings as well share some common thoughts about our Lord Jesus Christ and so we will indeed have “Two for the Price of One.” May the Lord bless our meditation upon His Word.

I. Epiphany

We begin then with Epiphany. The word basically means to “shine forth” or “shine out” and that is an appropriate name for this festival of the church. As the Old Testament Lesson read before reminds us, “Arise, shine for your light has come and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you. ... Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising.” In Matthew’s account of course we have the wise men, the Magi from the East and the star. It is because of the star that they journey to Jerusalem looking for him, “who has been born king of the Jews.” But it is of note that while it was the star that compelled them to journey it was the Word of God which directed them to the specific place. For when they inquired of King Herod about the child, King Herod inquired of the scribes and teachers and they quoted the words of Micah the prophet. “And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah ...” As the hymn has said, “And let Your Word within me shine as the fairest star ...” Once they resume their journey the star again appears before them and comes to rest over the place where the child was.

Upon finding the child they present their treasures to him as even the prophecy of Isaiah has reminded us: “They shall bring gold and frankincense, they shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord.” So they offered their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Yet most significantly they offered not only gifts to the child but they bowed down and worshiped him. And their worship is what is important. Think of the countless number of the people of God who in the centuries that have followed, kings and peasants, the powerful and the lowly, the

famous and the unknown, who have joined the magi in bowing down in worship before the child. And why would anyone worship a child? That question might be addressed further as we discuss the other event presented to us on this day.

II. The Baptism

The Gospel of Mark gives us just a very brief account of the baptism of Jesus. In fact, it is recorded as part of the account of the preaching and baptizing ministry of John the Baptist. We read of the people who came out to hear John preach and who after confessing their sins were baptized by him in the Jordan River. Yet John's message was never about himself. He always spoke of the one coming after him who would be more powerful and who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. It is in this context that the account is told about the baptism of Jesus. Yet even here there is a subtle connection with the Christmas accounts. For the words in v.9 of Mark 1 which are translated "in those days" literally can be translated: "And it came to pass in those days..." which are also the words in Luke 2 which introduce the story of Jesus' birth. Both events, the birth and now Jesus' baptism, are defining moments in the life of the Savior.

It is interesting that the evangelist Mark spends very little time describing the actual event of Jesus' baptism. He simply states it as a fact. But he does describe in great detail what happened following the baptism. "As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "'You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.'" (Mark 1:10-11) Here we have the revelation of the Holy Trinity at this the beginning of Jesus' ministry. For the Spirit descends upon the Son and the Father speaks his eternal and holy blessing, "You are my Son."

And it is the declaration of Jesus as the Son of God which ties his baptism together with the actions of the Magi as they bow down to worship the child. For it was no ordinary child who was sought by the wise men and above whose dwelling the star came to rest. It was no ordinary man upon whom the Spirit descended like a dove and the voice of the Father came from heaven. Epiphany is truly the revelation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Savior. Last week, we learned of it from his name which means "The Lord saves." This week we see it pointed out by the direction of the Lord God himself. It is His Son who is to do his ministry, live his life, and offer up himself as the perfect sacrifice upon the cross who is proclaimed. The light is shining upon Him. It is an Epiphany light. Yet the light does not just shine upon him for He Himself is the light. And in that we find our hope.

III. For Us.

There is one final point to be made on this day. The church has rightfully used the observance of the Baptism of our Lord as a reminder of our own baptism. We will in fact renew our baptismal vows following the sermon. In the Large Catechism Martin Luther

makes this point about Jesus' baptism when he writes: "In the same manner, and even much more, you should honor and exalt Baptism on account of the Word, since God himself has honored it by words and deeds and has confirmed it by wonders from heaven. Do you think it was a jest that the heavens opened when Christ allowed himself to be baptized, that the Holy Spirit descended visibly, and that the divine glory and majesty were manifested everywhere?" (LC Baptism para. 21, Tappert p.439) In the event of the Baptism of our Lord, God set forth the example of the holiness of Baptism. And when our Lord himself commanded baptism to his disciples saying, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit", he instituted this blessed Sacrament for our salvation and faith.

When we then, in our baptisms are buried with Christ into His death, we can give thanks for the manifold riches of the grace of God for us. So often in our lives we may feel discouraged, or lonely, or lost. We may wonder what it is that makes us special in God's eyes. Then, dear friends, remember your Baptism. Remember who you are. Say to yourself with all conviction, "I am a baptized child of God's own choosing. I have been baptized in His holy name." What a great promise and sign God has made for us in our baptism.

Conclusion

So it not a very long way from the house in Bethlehem where the magi found the child, to the Jordan River where the Holy Trinity was revealed in the Baptism of our Lord, to the font where God brings about our rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit in Holy Baptism. So perhaps today instead of being "Two for the Price of One" it has actually been three.

There stood the Son of God in love
His grace to us extending;
The Holy Spirit like a dove
Upon the scene descending;
The triune God assuring us,
With promises compelling,
That in our baptism he will thus
Among us find a dwelling
To comfort and sustain us.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.