

“Epiphany!”

Mark 1:1-11

Second Sunday after Epiphany, January 8, 2012, Year B

First Congregational Church, UCC, Saugus, Massachusetts

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The sacred imagery for the Christian events of this past week is almost too much to take in all at once. Friday was the Feast of the Epiphany, when the curious Magi came from the East to find the Baby-King of the Jews, following a mysterious star they had seen in the sky.

An epiphany – with a small “e” - is a dramatic moment that hits us abruptly – a moment when a complicated situation suddenly becomes clear. Some of us made have had an epiphany when, piecing together a puzzle of seemingly disconnected events, we suddenly hit on that one last piece that makes everything else crystal clear.

“The Epiphany”, with a capital “E”, is the first recognition of Jesus as the Messiah by the Gentiles, in this case, the Magi – also known as the three wise men or three kings – who came from the East, from somewhere in ancient Persia, which is now Iran. With our modern knowledge of Middle Eastern politics and religious wars, it is even more profound that the Magi - non-Jews from a culture hostile to Jews – would be the ones to follow that star and find the child lying in the manger. Recognizing him as someone truly regal and worthy of their respect, and in response to their epiphany, they offer him the most precious and expensive gifts they had in their possession. The story of The Epiphany is one to treasure as one of God’s most amazing miracles: God’s attempt to cross the boundaries of culture, religion, time and space to try to draw humanity together and towards God.

Another beautiful piece of sacred imagery in our Christian calendar this week is today’s Feast of the Baptism of Christ. In this scene from the Gospel of Mark, we find Jesus wading into the Jordan River, asking to be baptized by his cousin, John. The gospel says, “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 said from heaven, ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’” We have this gorgeous imagery, then, of a snowy white dove fluttering over Jesus, perhaps brushing him with her wings, as if anointing him for the hard work he was about to undertake. Again, here is our God, tearing open the boundary between heaven and earth, attempting to once again to bridge the gap between humanity and God, religions and cultures, time and space, in the person of Jesus, servant and king.

Today is a perfect day, then, to celebrate these epiphanies of the divine breaking into our world. For today we celebrate both Baptism and Communion, the two sacraments in the United Church of Christ. You may notice our hymns and our prayers today are all tied into the theme of baptism. As we speak, our Sunday School children are busy making paper doves to bring in to the sanctuary when it is time for them to join us for Communion. How very perfect is that?

So, let's talk about Baptism for a moment. Of course, many of us don't remember our own baptisms. For some of us of a certain age, we may have that fuzzy, black and white photograph of our infant selves in a long, white gown – whether boy or girl – being held by our godmother or father who are looking awkwardly down at this bulky bundle of joy smothered in white.

But we do remember the baptisms we have witnessed in our church. We see the anxious parents, the doting aunts and uncles, the camera-toting paparazzi, and of course, the baby in its little bundle of white. We watch them gather around the baptismal font and see the pastor touch the blessed water and then softly anoint the baby's forehead. As I describe it now, can you recall the image of the snowy white dove at that long ago Jordan River, anointing the head of Jesus with its holy wings? In the same way that the epiphany at Jesus's baptism showed us a glimpse of heaven, do we make the connection to our own baptism or those of the babies we stand as witnesses to? At every baptism, we believe God is present; that God sends the Holy Spirit to us and welcomes us – across people and cultures, across time and space – into the universal family of God.

Do you remember the words we say together at every baptism? I say something like, “Now I ask this congregation, what will be your part in helping these children discover the grace of God? And you say, “We promise our love, support and care to these children and their family as they live and grow in Christ's church.” We promise this for the children, but it is also a promise to be kept to each other all through our lives together.

Jesus' baptism reminds us that the gospel is “down to earth,” (Feasting on the Word, 237). The gospel reflects what really happens to us when we make the decision to follow God's call through Jesus. Today we celebrate a new beginning for our Sunday School, as Jean Brooks has graciously offered to teach our children in an all-ages group beginning next Sunday. We have prayed for a long time that God would call one of us out to do this work, and our prayers have been answered. But Jean is not answering this call alone; all of us have made promises to these

children at their baptisms to “love, support and care” for them. These are not lofty, esoteric promises – they are “down to earth” promises. They are promises with feet and hands and hearts. When we are asked to take a turn spending time with our children, we are really being asked to answer God’s call to us to live out our baptismal promises. Who knows? By answering God’s call, we may open ourselves to our own epiphany of the divine presence working in our lives.

As the Spirit moves and inspires at the Sacrament of Baptism, likewise, at the Communion table, we ask the blessing of the Holy Spirit upon the bread and cup. We invoke the presence of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit to be with us, across people and cultures – remember our table is open to all who want to join us – and across time and space – because at the table, Christian time is suspended into one, holy moment, when Jesus is remembered as the teacher who once walked among us, as the Spirit who is present with us now, and as the One who will greet us when we meet at our life’s end, when the heavens will be torn open to receive us by our loving God.

The rich imagery of our Christian faith keeps revealing God to us over and over again, in so many ways:

* The Magi, traveling across the desert on camelback, in their richly colored robes, carrying ornate boxes of gold, frankincense and myrrh, following a bright star shining somewhere off to the West. Arriving at the rude stable where a newborn child lay in a cow’s manger, with tired but happy parents, surrounded by shepherds and angels, lighted by the star in the heavens. Recognizing majesty when they saw it, laying their gifts at the foot of the manger, in homage to the Baby King.

* The Jordan River, rushing around the feet of Jesus and John the Baptist. John bending down to scoop up some water to pour over the head of Jesus. The sudden opening of the heavens. The snowy white dove descending upon Jesus, anointing him as the Messenger, the Messiah, of God.

* Our Communion table, set with simple yet precious gifts of the earth – bread and juice – to signify the many meals Jesus took with the poor and outcast as well as the rich and influential. The Holy Spirit descending to bless these gifts that we take into our bodies. Christian time suspended for a sacred moment, as we remember Jesus past, present and future. Our serving each other the way Jesus served us. The gospel is being brought “down to earth” among the people that God loves.

May we always remember the beauty and imagery of our Christian heritage; may we always seek to find sacred meaning in the intricacies of everyday life, studying the scriptures together, celebrating the sacraments, holding to our promises to one another, and serving the God who surprises us by appearing to us in strange and wonderful ways, across all religions, cultures, time and space. And in our “down to earth” existence, may God bless us all with an epiphany of our own. Thanks be to our God. Amen.

References

Bartlett, David L., and Taylor, Barbara Brown, eds., Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 212-217, 236-241.

UCC Clergy Lectionary Group, Amesbury, Mass., Jan. 3, 2012.