

St. John's Episcopal Church  
Hamlin, Pennsylvania  
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.  
The First Sunday After The Epiphany  
7 January 2018

Scripture readings:

Genesis 1:1-5   Psalm 29   Acts 19:1-7   Mark 1:4-11

Earlier in my ministry I used to be suspicious of celebrating the baptism of Jesus so shortly after celebrating the nativity, the birth of Jesus. I was in my own pure, accusatory, self-righteous, ignorant heart...wrong. *[laughter]* I thought that it was some kind of attempt on the part of the Church to advocate for and defend infant baptism. It has nothing to do with that, allegedly.

Yesterday was The Solemnity of the Epiphany when we remember in the Church the arrival of the Wise Men. I came in yesterday to do some video for Joey Pettinato for his Cub Scout work, showing him as an acolyte. I don't know who was in the church - fairies or somebody - but the three kings had moved from the window sill to the floor. *[laughter]* They arrived on time. There they are!

The Epiphany is known by some as "Little Christmas." Those of us who come from this part of the world and near the coal regions know that there are loads and loads of Orthodox people and there are two calendars. There's the Julian Calendar which was allegedly initiated by Julius Caesar and the Gregorian Calendar by Pope Gregory. We're working on a common date for Easter. I think that will happen, maybe in our lifetimes. Who knows?

The business of the Epiphany in the Orthodox Church includes the arrival of the Magi, the Baptism of Jesus, and the commemoration also of the Transfiguration of Jesus - events that are considered epiphanies or you could use the word "theophany." Now I know those are words you've used ten times already this week and plan to use even more frequently next week. Who talks about epiphanies or theophanies? But I'll bet there's not a person in here who doesn't know what cellophane is. *[laughter]* And what does that have to do with epiphany or theophany? Well, it's the "phany" part: epi-phany and theo-phany and cello-phany. *Phanein* is the Greek verb, the infinitive "to see." "Epi" simply means to see in front of or above or before you. And "theo" means God, the ability to see God.

All of these things that we could lump together and remember and celebrate today - the Baptism of Jesus, the arrival of the Magi, and the Transfiguration - are times when we remember and scripture tells us that the heavens opened up and God is heard to speak. Now people who make movies and films love when God speaks because then you get big sunrises and deep voices (because we all know God is an old man) and all kinds of extraordinary cinematic stuff going on. We don't often hear God speak so directly, so succinctly and so clearly. And so in those celebrations that come at this time of the year somehow we come to believe and teach and confess that God was seen, understood and believed to be in the person of Jesus in a way that God was never perceived before.

The older I get, the more I like this business of Jesus going to the Jordan to be baptized that we read about today because if you start with understandings of Jesus as perfect and sinless and the particular child of God, you would normally ask - as everybody has and still does, and we ought to ask why in the world would he need to be baptized? And particularly with the baptism of John which was for the forgiveness of sins.

Now I'm going to prove to you that I really skate on thin ice as a blatant heretic and suggest that maybe the baptism of John was important for Jesus as possibly a sinner. Now that violates every plank of orthodoxy in Church lore, history and tradition, and it puts me in the company of very few people. I don't care. I invite you to at least admit that consideration for this purpose: If the Church is going to claim Jesus as a model, it seems to me that all of the effort we make at remembering the divine aspect of Jesus excuses us from using him as a model because you and I are very comfortable making the confession that we are not divine and that we are by nature sinful and unclean and that we cannot redeem ourselves and that we need help beyond the help we are able to provide ourselves so we turn to God as sinners. I see a lot of discomfort, smiles, and sniggers and dental-ware being bit back in. If for a moment we can grasp the possibility that Jesus went to his cousin John for

the assurance of the forgiveness of sin, maybe then we can appropriate Jesus as a model for living more effectively and more really. The point is: Are we going to use Jesus as a model for our own lives, and if so, I want to get rid of every excuse not to. If we need to understand that Jesus was forgiven in this baptism of some sinful nature or sinful behavior or whatever it is, known or unknown, is it possible to appropriate that to our own selves for our own benefit.

If nothing else, the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan by John is a model of humility, especially - it seems to me - for someone who may not have needed it. So take your choice, but don't get rid of Jesus or his example.

This is one of the complaints I had as a Lutheran growing up - that the Church of the Reformation did such a good job of eradicating Mary for fear of the Medieval over-emphasis on her as a biblical figure that we forgot the model that *she* provides as a human being. You know the Orthodox Church doesn't do with Mary what the Western Church does with her. The Western Church wants to make her also conceived and born without sin - immaculate, meaning unspotted. You have macular degeneration? If you don't, you learn about it. It's the same word as the Immaculate Heart of Mary and all that. Macula means spot. Macular degeneration means you have a spot on your retina. Immaculate means you're without a spot. This whole business of Mary being without spot or blemish and sinless works the same kind of debilitating theological mess on her that I think we sometimes do with Jesus that excuses her from being an example, and I think she's one of the best biblical examples we have - of a young woman, pregnant and not married.

As recently as yesterday I had a discussion with a beloved relative of mine of a very, very different political viewpoint than mine who said, "*I do not want to be paying for the mistakes of others,*" meaning the bastard children of poor people. And I inquired about the unmarried daughter and grandchild living in that very household. Do you see how we need real examples and how when we lay aside our hypocrisy, we can be moved to a kind of mercy the examples of which have endured in the lore and tradition and life of the Church for 2,000 years which, if we appropriate them for our own benefit without pushing them outside of our experience as not real or divine or too holy to mean anything to us, we can start to begin to say, "*This is real stuff that applies to me, my situation, my life and my relationships with everybody else in the world.*"

I've become less and less and less excited about whether or not people believe that Jesus was God. And I've become less and less and less excited about whether or not people believe that Mary was a part of the godhead. The Orthodox Church does a great thing with this, I think. The Orthodox Church does not make her into something special or divine. The Orthodox Church understands that Mary is a daughter of Adam, by nature sinful and unclean - but a sinner as we talk about Original Sin - born a human being. Just look at the wall behind you where you see the role of Mary in terms of Eastern Church iconography. There she is enthroned with the Christ Child on her lap, known as the Queen of Heaven and all the rest of it, and certainly profoundly honored in the Orthodox tradition, but as the human being to be assumed into the godhead because of her faithful response when she to God's ridiculous invitation to allow God to live within her, instead of saying "*It can't be,*" she instead says "*Yes!*"

And so the Orthodox Church comes up with this marvelous word *theosis*. She's the first person to be assumed into the godhead by her response and God's mercy. And *is*, therefore, the example for the rest of us, not giving us an excuse in saying, "*Oh, she's God,*" but that she shows us that we, too, can be assumed into the godhead and that we, too, can be used in our lives right here and right now to be a place where God lives. And that's not foreign to us because every time we come here we approach this altar to be, as Mary was - man, woman, child, young, old, black, white, healthy, ill, whatever you are - we come here to be impregnated by God, to become vessels of the Body of Christ in the world today. Now that's ridiculous! That's what makes it religious! That's what makes it miraculous. And that's what makes these stories so wonderful if we can move them 2,000 years forward and apply them to ourselves now. It is ridiculous for a fourteen-year-old, uneducated, poor, Jewish girl to have God in her guts. But that's what we've spent all of Advent and Christmas thinking about, working on, believing, teaching that God did that, and God still wants to do that now in you and in me - to have flesh in the world,

So there is a biblical tradition which precedes Jesus. We quickly write that off as Old Testament. There

has been for thousands of years before Jesus the idea that God would indeed come into the world in a person, expected to be a very successful and triumphant warrior called the messiah. And the people who started to believe in Jesus say, “*Well, this might be the guy who is that messiah.*” And he didn’t ride a horse, didn’t have any kind of armor, armory, firearms, weapons... nothing. He had a simple message that he believed God loved him fully and completely and everyone else in the world. And that fit no models that existed. It fit the model of his mother who said yes to a crazy idea. And *he* says yes to a crazy idea and in the end it costs him his life, but it’s an idea he never abandons. And the idea is we dare to boil down to a single word in our language which is love.

One of the most interesting encounters I had during this Christmas season was with the creche within the home of Hugh and Sarah Miller where I was the other night for dinner. On their mantelpiece is an absolutely stunning set of figures looking very much like the Neapolitan figures which adorn the huge Christmas tree in the Metropolitan Museum of Art every year in New York - but way smaller. But amongst all of the figures of the Wise Men and the shepherds and the angels and Mary and Joseph, there is a pig. *A pig!* Why a pig? It was simple - that God’s gift to Israel is God’s gift also to those who are not kosher, to the rest of the world. And the arrival of the Wise Men and the presence of the pig is pretty much one of the very emphatic explanations of the importance of the epiphany - that God’s gift of God’s self in terms of a messiah fulfilling the prophecies given to Israel is God’s gift to the world - to the kosher and the non-kosher alike, to the rich and to the poor. That’s important to remember in these days, that God makes a gift of God’s self even to the unsavory and overly wealthy who proclaim themselves to be greedy and wish to be greedy for others - whatever that means. That God’s love is for all people - those who get it, those who don’t get it, those who are right believing (orthodox) and I think some heretics as well. Anybody want to line up after me?

So here is this extraordinary contemporarily applicable story of God desiring to live in the world with us, like us, even *in* us - and may I suggest to you that these traditions of Jesus’ baptism and the transfiguration when the heavens open and God speaks, that nothing less than that happens every time this font gets opened and every time a human being is baptized here.

The message for you in your baptism and every other baptism in Christianity is the same one that Jesus received when he was baptized. And his baptism was different from John’s baptism. John’s baptism was for those old enough to know they were sinners. Babies don’t know that, but babies do know when they’re loved. We know scientifically if children and infants are not loved, they will not thrive. So the Church throughout the world repeats the words of God the Creator to every baptized human being: *You are my beloved daughter. You are my beloved son. You are my beloved trans child. You are my beloved queer child. You are my beloved black child. You are my beloved child. I am pleased with you because you’re mine. Not because you’re loveable, but because you are mine.*

Well, if that’s not gospel, friends, I don’t know what in the world is. I haven’t the vaguest idea. If that’s not what Jesus was saying, I invite you to convince me of something else. Mary got it. This is nuts, but it’s what God wants. Can we get it? This is nuts, but can God be seen in the world in and through us as we allow God to live in us as a body individually and corporately as a people who simply say, “*Contrary to what the rest of the world says, God loves us and all whom God has created.*” And that is what we believe makes God visible in the world today. Are we ready to be a part of the epiphany, the business of God being seen? Are we ready to be a part of the theophany, the business of God being seen in the world today? You can’t do it by yourself, but you can be impregnated by the word of God for your ears, by the word of God in the sacrament, by the word of God in your flesh and blood.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.