

Prayer: Gracious Father, you are Lord of our beginnings and our endings and all that lies between. We praise you: for how you have poured out upon us blessing after blessing; for how you have reached out to us; for how you have come to us; for how you have spoken to us. Help us to live the faith you have given us. In Jesus name. Amen.

ADVENT IN PLAIN SIGHT - STARS and WATER

On the First Sunday after Epiphany, the church remembers the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist as recounted in the gospels. In that story, the power of the Holy Spirit is evident at the very outset of Jesus' public life of faith. Jesus surfaces from the waters of the Jordan, the heavens open, a dove descends, and a voice from heaven declares, "You are my beloved Child; with you I am well pleased."

The word Epiphany comes from the Greek "epiphania", which means manifestation or revelation and suggests a shining light. On this day, the church recalls God's manifest presence in this and the many other episodes of Jesus' life. As we reflect on Jesus' baptism, we recall our own baptism as well. Methodists do not support repeating baptism but allows us to make repeated use of our baptism. A truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism once begun and ever to be continued. (Martin Luther) Whether we have been baptized or not, remember it or not, we have opportunity today to claim and rejoice in the very real ways in which God comes to light in the church and in our lives. Through baptism, God declares that we are beloved children of God. God is well pleased.

Christians are invited to "remember their baptism and be thankful." It is a time to renew the baptismal covenant.

Combining Epiphany and Baptism of the Lord. There isn't enough time to get all these events in—especially since we usually have congregational worship only on Sundays, or most of us anyway. Yesterday was Epiphany; today is Baptism of the Lord. It isn't difficult to place them together, however. You might lose the Magi if you skip ahead to the baptism, but the theme is certainly there. Revealing the presence of God in our midst and Jesus joining the ranks of those who stand in need of redemption – even though Jesus didn't. Jesus' plunge into the waters, like a polar bear swimmer, was a sign of God with us.

They were there again. Those polar bear guys and gals. In every town and city, it seems. They run down on New Year's Day to leap into the city's river, lake, or pond. Burr. I imagine that everybody of water on January 1 is cold enough for their purposes.

That's what fascinates me, I guess. Those purposes. I'm sure they have them. Even if they are of the mountain climbing variety – "Because it's there!" Some argue the health benefits of a bracing dip in the water. In Finland, apparently, they heat up in the sauna and then run and roll in the snow or plunge in icy waters, and it is supposed to be good for something. Heart? Circulation? Mental stability?

But why New Year's Day? What is the significance there? Maybe it is getting it over with. Maybe if you start the day by jumping in a frozen lake or river, you figure your year has got to be uphill from there. You survive that, you can survive anything.

That makes some sense, in a weird sort of way. Maybe it is a new start. Maybe they figure the heart stops with the shock of the cold water, and so it is kind of like being reborn. I've got to admit, there is theological precedent for that mindset. Okay, it isn't the coldness, necessarily, but water is a symbol of rebirth for us Christians. A symbol of birth. A Thanksgiving prayer talks about how God sent Jesus "nurtured in the waters of the womb," a reminder of the humanity of Christ.

Water figures in both the Gospel and the Hebrew scriptures passages for this Sunday. It is the second Sunday of Epiphany and, therefore, the baptism of the Lord. But the Old Testament passage also mentions water.

When time began, God was. When Creation came to be, God was the cause. The water here is the incubator, the womb of God out of which Creation is birthed. "The wind of God swept over the face of the waters," says the

NRSV; “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters,” says the NIV. Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* says, “God’s Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.” I like that. Brooded. Like a hen tending the eggs before they hatch, like a mother waiting for the time to give birth. God tends the creation; God calls it forth.

John 1:3 (NRSV) says, “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” It was the Word that brought forth light, and then it was the Word that pronounced it good.

We sometimes forget that part of the story. We wrestle over creation; we argue about theories, but we sometimes forget the goodness that is a part of all that God has created. Or maybe we forget what “good” means. God saw that it was good. But the light was not yet complete. The sun hadn’t been made yet, in the story. The moon and the “lesser lights” of the stars were still on the drawing board. But it was good. Goodness must mean something other than finished. It must mean something other than perfect as we define that term. Perhaps it means born of God. Or maybe it means that we have found what we’re looking for.

In the state of Texas, there are several churches that have set a service of Communion to the music of U2. Similarly, other churches have used a Bible study series based on the old *Mayberry* television show. The church often looks to popular culture as a way of connecting faith and life; sometimes it helps us hear the gospel in new ways.

The Irish band U2 has always been upfront about their Christian faith. U2 songs seem to be more about questions than about answers. The song “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” epitomizes that best for me. The final verse and chorus read like this:

I believe in the Kingdom Come / Then all the colors will bleed into one / But yes I'm still running / You broke the bonds / You loosed the chains / You carried the cross / And my shame / And my shame / You know I believe it / But I still haven't found / What I'm looking for.

I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For lyrics © Polygram Int. Music Publishing B.v.

The song has a sort of an “I believe, help my unbelief” kind of theme—where many of us live our lives, somewhere between doubt and certainty. This just might be the oddest way possible to begin a reflection on the Baptism of the Lord.

If you keep up on all things liturgical, then you know that the Sunday after Epiphany is the Baptism of the Lord. So, we go from Christmas and all that celebration to Epiphany (which is on the twelfth day of Christmas - hence the song) and the wise men finding their way to the child; then we leap forward some thirty years to the baptism of Jesus. The main characters of the story are Jesus and John the Baptist. And I doubt that you could find a couple of guys more certain about faith and their roles in the world than those two. They seemed to radiate faith and confidence. That was part of John’s appeal, I believe. Folks flocked to this wild man from the desert with his questionable clothing choices and fad diet from an entomologist’s nightmare. There was more than the curiosity factor at work here. There was a longing for certainty. Mark’s version pares down the conversation and the sermon, but the other gospels reflect a man who railed against doubters and the powers of this world that would confuse us. He hands out advice like a man writing a “Dear Abby” column. He knows what’s what and who is who. John, on the other hand, just gets to the point; he knows his place, the role he is called to play in this drama of salvation, and he plays it with passion.

So, where does all my musing about uncertainty come from? I can’t read about John without remembering Jesus’ comments later, in Matthew and Luke. Jesus says to the people concerning their fascination with John, “What did you go out to see?” (Matthew 11:7-15 & Luke 7:25-30) In both accounts, these remarks are occasioned by the questions that came from John when he had been imprisoned and faced certain death. Suddenly, even John’s certainty seemed elusive.

What did they go out to see? Someone who knew. Someone who had found what he (and they) was looking for. So, John gave it to them with water and with words. They glimpsed it in the gathering of the multitudes: “the

whole countryside ... all the people of the city.” That was why they splashed into the river to be baptized by this crazy man. He had something they wanted. He saw what they were looking for. And he pointed it out. It’s not me, he declared over and over, though they thought it was him. That’s why they kept coming and kneeling and letting the water of his certainty wash over them. But it wasn’t him; it was another; it was that guy. That guy was Jesus, who came to be baptized by John. Not, I believe, because Jesus needed the repentance and the certainty that was on offer but because he wanted to be present. He wanted to align himself with a move back toward God, a movement toward certainty. And because he wanted to be a memory that would come back to them when the doubts came creeping back in.

Glimpses, that’s what we get. We want certainty; we want to be sure. But we get hints. We get whispers. And yet Epiphany and the Baptism of Jesus remind us that those hints are all around us. Just open your eyes and see and be reminded. See the presence in the drops of water that bead up on our glass on a humid day. Baptism tells us that if this water is a carrier of the Holy Spirit, then any water can be. The water you showered with this morning, the water you drank when you were thirsty after a long hard day, the water you gaze out upon in your favorite rest and renewal place; these all vibrate with the Spirit. It is all a reminder that you were claimed that you are a beloved child with whom God is well pleased.

Of course, we need reminders of our baptism. It is too much of an event to keep in our hearts all the time. We forget what a transformative moment baptism is. We forget that everything old is torn away, like the heavens were rent apart, as Mark says. We forget that our orientation is from that moment; our new life is claimed in that moment. We forget that what we are looking for, longing for, is already ours in that moment. We lose our grip; we forget it even happened. We are still running; we are still looking for what we already have.

Remember your baptism. It isn’t just an empty ritual for Sunday mornings. It is a way of living that keeps our eyes open for the descending doves of the Spirit. It is a choice that we can claim to embrace the possibilities in front of us instead of the doubts within us. It is an opportunity to know that we are loved and claimed and that whatever darkness is hiding away in our past or our hearts need not define us anymore. It is a family we’ve entered, who will run with us as we search for what we are looking for, and who will avoid saying “told you so” when we realize what we are looking for has been with us all the time.