

"Epiphany"

Text: Mark 1:4-11

May God the Holy Spirit remain living and active in your heart, continually reminding you that you are, by his grace, a holy, sinless, child of God through faith in Jesus Christ, and therefore also an ambassador of that same Lord Jesus, representing him to the world. Amen.

Fellow sinners who have been introduced, through the Epiphany, to your Savior, Jesus Christ:

Those of you who have attended services here for any length of time might well have noticed that I don't tend to follow the accepted or prescribed process for public speaking (the Toastmasters methodology). The "book" says that a presenter should always begin by telling his audience what he is going to say, and then he's supposed to say it, and then conclude by telling his audience what he said. My assumption (hope) is that you will listen carefully enough the first time, and that you would probably be tuned out by the third time.

You have also probably noticed that I don't typically list theme and parts in the bulletin and that the "theme" that *is* printed in the bulletin is most often not a true theme but more of a title, and that those titles are often rather vague. There is also method behind that madness, for better or for worse. The goal is to create curiosity or interest in what is coming next.

This morning's title or theme is even more vague than usual – again for a reason. I'd be curious to know what came to mind when you first read the title, although I suspect I know. What came to mind was probably nothing at all – which itself gives indication of a problem we need to address. What, after all, is "Epiphany"? Is it just a word, an event, a season, or what? What does it mean and what thoughts or emotions is it supposed to elicit or produce in God's children?

This is the topic we will explore this morning (and, there, I've told you what we are going to talk about so we've actually made a proper Toastmaster start). The text that will form the basis for our study is found in Mark's Gospel, the First Chapter:

^{ESV} **Mark 1:4-11** *John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather*

belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." ⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

These are the words of our God, given to us through verbal inspiration by the Holy Spirit speaking through the Apostles and Prophets of old. We have great confidence in these words and in their ability not only to guide and direct us, but to actually keep every single promise that they make. That our God would instruct and comfort us also this morning, so also we study these words with this prayer in our hearts: **"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."** Amen.

You can answer for yourself, but most acknowledge that when they hear the word "epiphany" nothing at all comes to mind. Nor do most of us tend to pay much attention to any sort of celebration on Epiphany or during the following the season of the church year. (Epiphany is both a specific day – January 6 – and the season of the Church year that stretches from Christmas to Lent. If you perhaps read a recent Lutheran Spokesman article on the subject (written, by the way, by one of my favorite authors) you may recall that a dramatic shift in emphasis has taken place in the Christian Church in regard to our understanding and celebration of Epiphany. Our church forefathers, for example, are said to have regarded Epiphany as the preeminent Christian celebration, placing much greater emphasis on Epiphany than even Christmas or Easter. In fact it wasn't until almost 300 years after Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension that the first Christian Emperor (Constantine) designated December 25 as Christmas Day. Even then, the Church sort of backed into that date. It was believed that the Angel Gabriel's visit to Mary (known as the Annunciation) took place on March 25, and that that date therefore marked the start of his human life. The Church at the time of Constantine just added 9 months to that date and came up with December 25. As Christians we know that Jesus entered our world at his conception, not his birth – which is why his conception-day, rather than his birth-day, was celebrated by the earliest Christians.

The word *epiphany* itself means "manifestation" or "appearance" – which most today associate with the star that "appeared" and led the

Gentile Wisemen or Magi to Jesus. Since the season of Epiphany is therefore all about the revelation of God's grace to all, three events (or Bible texts) are commonly used in the celebration of this manifestation: the star that led the Magi, the changing of water to wine in Cana, and the baptism of Jesus (mentioned in our text for this morning). All have very specific implications. The star that led the Magi establishes the fact that God was also including the Gentiles in his salvation plan, since the Magi themselves were Gentiles. The changing of water to wine reminds us that God made his Son known to the world through the working of miracles. The account of Jesus' baptism reveals how God verbally and specifically revealed exactly who Jesus was at his baptism when he said, **"You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."**

But why exactly was Epiphany held in such high regard in former times, and why has it mostly fallen by the way today? For starters, it's a dramatic oversimplification to think of Epiphany simply as "God revealing Jesus to the world." It clearly carried far greater significance in the Christian Church for centuries. Unfortunately, the passage of time and the shift in our cultural mindset have long since masked the significance first recognized by the earliest Christians.

The primary culprit here is our modern sense of entitlement. We are Americans, and therefore steeped in the culture of *"all men created equal"* and therefore also equally *"endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights."* You and I have never known a time when God was known as anything other than "our Father" and therefore also highly accessible to all, regardless of race. We were never raised in a culture that believed that Jesus would come as the Savior only of the Jews. Yet the very fact that Jesus Christ came as Savior for all mankind, which we today simply take for granted, was actually quite shocking to the earliest Christian Jews – including also the Apostles themselves. The Apostle Peter, for example, had to be shown in a vision that Gentiles (non-Jews) were not to be considered unclean, and he then had to defend his inclusion of Gentiles in the gospel promise before the church leaders in Jerusalem. Their reaction, after hearing Peter's explanation, is telling: ***When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."*** (Acts 11:18-19) This should have answered the question once and for all, but it didn't. In the very next verse we read, ***"Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews."***

To the earliest Christians, therefore, Epiphany was a most thrilling celebration. God not only sent his Son into the world of the Jews, and to the Jews revealed him, he sent and manifested his Son for every single human being.

Have you ever seen someone receive some sort of honor or award at a special ceremony who, through their words or general demeanor, gave the distinct impression that they felt *entitled* to the honor that was being paid them – someone who appeared *not* to be humbled and deeply moved, but acted rather as though a debt was finally being paid or a well-deserved honor given? If you have, you know how profoundly *unbecoming* that is. I wonder, in that regard, if that isn't how God regards our cavalier attitude toward Epiphany and our presumption of inclusion in his salvation plan.

In fact any presumption at all in connection with God's plan for our salvation turns the gospel itself on its ear. We rightly define *grace* as "God's undeserved love for sinners." Arguably, the most important word in that definition is "undeserved." In fact if you remove that one word from the definition of grace, most in our society would probably embrace it. Most believe that God, if he actually exists, would obviously love them. They are shot through with self-love and self-importance, and therefore are incapable of imagining a scenario where God could love others, but not they themselves.

What really therefore sets the Christian faith apart, and the gospel of *grace* in particular, is that one word "undeserved." In fact it could be argued that no one can really possess a full understanding of the Christian faith that does not first understand the concept of "undeserved." From this we can begin to see how and why those earliest Christians came to treasure both the event and the season of Epiphany.

When they first heard that they too were included in God's salvation plan, they received the news with open-mouthed incredulity. They were, in other words, absolutely shocked that a righteous God in heaven would not only sacrifice his Son for *mankind*, but that he would intentionally include *each one of them* in that salvation plan. Believing, they simply "could not believe" that God could love also *them*, include *them*, want also *them* to spend eternity with him in his heaven. That's the attitude you and I want to hold in our hearts – the clear understanding that we have not received from our God what we deserved.

Yet just here, in the very discussion of *grace*, we identify yet another danger, yet another example of the very thing we want to correct. Just here, when we are discussing the *undeserved* component or nature of grace, we can easily find ourselves imagining we must somehow still *earn* that *undeserved* love.

When we hear, for example, that we have been taking Epiphany for granted, and that we have been demonstrating a sense of entitlement toward God, what is the initial inclination of our sinful hearts? Far too often it is to imagine that we must somehow correct this mindset *if we are to present to God the sort of people that he can love?* In other words, we develop this strange notion that through our actions we must *earn* our God's *unearned* love. We regard the proper regard and commemoration of Epiphany as yet another law that must be observed – as something more that we must do. That's not grace.

Is it actually *wrong* then to want to correct what is sinful or unappreciative in our lives? Of course not. What is *wrong* is assuming that this will, in any way, make us more deserving of God's love and favor. That love was given to mankind once and for all when Christ paid our sin debt. Having been brought to faith, we are new creations. That new man has been born in us, and it is that new man that wants to thank our God for his undeserved love. It is that new man in us that recognizes that the best way to thank our God (not to "pay him back" but to thank him) is to conform every aspect of our thoughts, words, and deeds to his will.

God grant us then a greater appreciation for his Epiphany and of our own unworthiness to receive any gift from him at all – let alone the sacrifice of his own Son. The Holy Spirit fill our hearts, thereby, with an ever greater appreciation for the true nature of his grace, his *undeserved* love. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Genesis 1:1-5** In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ² The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. ³ And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

^{ESV} **Romans 6:1-11** What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ 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. ⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For one who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸ Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰ For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

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The First Sunday in Epiphany – January 7, 2018

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 129

"Hail Thou Source of Every Blessing"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. *(Brown Hymnal)*

The Scripture Lessons: *(Printed on the back page of this bulletin)*

The Epistle Lesson: (Genesis 1:1-5) Our first reading on this first Sunday in the new year is, appropriately enough, the first five verses of the Bible. As we look forward to another year of service to our Lord and to our neighbor, it is fitting that we consider how it all begins with Creation. We are the Lords not only because he redeemed us at the cost of his lifeblood, but also because he created us. He is our Maker. It should not surprise us therefore that a world in rebellion against God would deny his very existence, denying also therefore the fact that he is their Creator. If man can convince himself that God does not exist, he can also then justify his sinful disobedience. It all begins with Creation.

Psalm 8 (Supplement page 27) *(Brown Hymnal)*

The New Testament Lesson: (Romans 6:1-11) As we seek to serve God and our neighbor in the coming year, it is very helpful to be reminded of just who and what we are. Our second reading does just that, reminding us that, having been brought to faith in Jesus Christ, we are new creations. Having "died to sin" and having been released from our former slavery to sin, we are now free to serve our God according to his desires. Since we are now dead to sin, but alive to righteousness, we have a freedom the world cannot comprehend.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed *(Brown Hymnal page 15)*

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 718 *(Stanzas 1-3) (Brown Hymnal)*

"O Jesus, King of Glory"

The Sermon – Mark 1:4-11 *(Printed on the back page of this bulletin)*

"Epiphany"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 134 *(Red Hymnal)*

"Songs of Thankfulness and Praise"

The Prayers

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 718 *(Stanzas 4-5) (Brown Hymnal)*

"O Jesus, King of Glory"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance – Sunday (38) Ave (43) Mortgage Balance (\$0)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Bible Study
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour

CLC News – Pastor Neal Radichel is considering the call to Immanuel of Mankato, MN. In his infinite mercy and wisdom, the Lord this week unexpectedly called home Nathaniel Krause, the 21 year-old son of Pastor Paul and Collette Krause in Watertown. Please keep the Krause family in your prayers in the difficult days ahead.

Church Council Notes – Six members of the Church Council were present for the meeting on Thursday, January 4. Having completed a course of instruction with the Pastor, and at his recommendation, the Council approved the application of Lori Jonas for communicant membership – pending the Sunday notices required by our constitution. Outgoing Treasurer Adams reported that offerings exceed expenses by \$1,698 in December. The General Fund ended the year with a positive balance of \$1,320. Our CEF note has been redeemed for \$26,045, the balance of our mortgage was paid and the new copier was purchased. The next Council meeting is scheduled for February 11.

Membership Application – Having completed a course of instruction with the Pastor, Lori Jonas has applied for communicant membership.