

Epiphany Baptism of Jesus

INTRODUCTION TO EPIPHANY

People of God, Yesterday was the Feast of the Epiphany, and it began the six-week Season of Epiphany in the church calendar. During Epiphanytide the Church reflects upon the manifestation of the Glory of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ before His passion and death.

Christ first manifested His glory to the Gentiles when the Magi visited him. They brought the glory of their riches - gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the Newborn King. By paying homage to Him, they fulfilled Isa. 60, by glorifying God's house of Glory. For Jesus is God's house of Glory, tabernacled among us in the flesh.

On the First Sunday after the Epiphany, which is today, the Church celebrates the manifestation of the Lord's glory at Christ's baptism. Here we see all three persons of the Trinity revealed, in the Father speaking from Heaven, the Son standing in the water, and the Spirit descending upon the Son from Heaven.

Jumping ahead to next week, the Second Sunday in Epiphany, the Church has traditionally remembered the glory of God being revealed in Jesus' first miracle which he wrought in Cana of Galilee when he turned water into wine. John even says at the end of the passage, *"This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory."*

We then jump ahead to the last Sunday of the Epiphany Season, where we see the Lord's glory manifested one more time in its fullest expression this side of Heaven on the Mount of Transfiguration. Here the Lord shows what our human nature will be like when we are glorified. And this encourages us to enter into

the season of Lent and to prepare ourselves to go to the cross with the Lord Jesus.

Epiphany is a season that aims to help us recognize the glory of God in Jesus Christ during key moments of his life and ministry before he prepares for his death. By seeing God's glory in Christ, we are transformed and strengthened to carry our cross every day.

The entire church calendar is intended to focus our attention on Christ's life year after year so that we can be better prepared to see His glory on the last day, when He will transform us into His likeness because we will see Him as He is.

THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD = NEW CREATION

Now, as I already said, today is the First Sunday After the Epiphany, which means we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus Christ.

Now the OT Scripture given to the Church to meditate on today comes from Gen. 1. And I am going to read vss. 1-5 again.

In the beginning God created the Heavens and Earth. The Earth was without form, and void; and darkness as on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And saw the light and it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day.

Now, hear the passage in Mark 1 about Christ's baptism, and listen for similar themes you heard from Genesis 1.

⁹*It came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And immediately, coming up from the water, He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending*

upon Him like a dove. ¹¹Then a voice came from heaven, "You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

You may have never considered this, but Scripture presents the baptism of Jesus as a New Creation. What we see in the account of the first creation is exactly what we see in Jesus' baptism.

Just as the Spirit of God hovered over the waters at the Creation, so does the Holy Spirit hover over the waters at Christ's baptism. Just as God spoke from Heaven saying, "*Let there be Light*" and calling it good, so too does God speak approvingly from Heaven over Jesus who is the uncreated Light of the world, saying, "*This is my Beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.*"

In Genesis God divided the light from the darkness. And in His baptism, Jesus is set apart as the Light. Yet, he identifies himself with sinful humanity who are still in the darkness of their sins, so that He can call us out of the darkness and into His glorious light. This he does when we are united to Christ in His baptism.

Thus the Baptism of Jesus Christ is one of the many places in Scripture in which God inaugurates a New Creation in the world and in His people.

To fill this out, let us consider another instance where the Spirit and Water are present to bring about a New Creation. First, consider the Flood of Noah. We can see the image in this, a dove flying back and forth over the flood waters until it plucks a branch of an olive tree and brings it back to Noah. Jesus Christ is that branch, the first fruits of the New Creation, signifying and inaugurating the renewal of all things.

This first day of creation and the flood of Noah provides some of the basic biblical imagery and symbolism behind Jesus' statement to Nicodemus in John 3 when he says, *"Unless you are born again, or born from above, you cannot enter the kingdom of God."* And then he qualifies what that means to be born again when he says, *"Unless a person is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."*

The apostle Paul ties the water and the Spirit together in Titus 3 when he says,

³For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. ⁴But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, ⁵not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Thus the water and the Spirit are always present together. The objective reality of the New Creation in the world comes about through the Water and the Spirit. And for a person to enter into that New Creation subjectively and personally, or rather should I say, for the New Creation to enter into them, they also need to be born of Water and the Spirit.

Water and Spirit are always present throughout the Scriptures to bring about New Creations. And so on this day, we remember the one baptism which Christ received by Water and the Spirit to

bring about a New Creation, into which we must all enter if we are to be born again and see the kingdom of God.

HEAVENS TORN OPEN

But there is another important thing we must see in Christ's baptism as recorded in Mark's gospel. Mark says, Christ came *up from the water, He saw the heavens parting – or He saw the Heavens being torn open – ESV.*

It is important to stop and ask a question here. Which Heavens were being torn open? To answer that, we need to go back to Genesis 1 and read about the second day.

⁶Then God said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters." ⁷Thus God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament; and it was so. ⁸And God called the firmament Heaven. So the evening and the morning were the second day.

On the second day of creation, God created the Firmament. The Firmament, or the Heavens, or the Sky, and separated the waters that were above the Firmament from the waters that were below the Firmament. The waters below the Firmament are the seas and oceans of the world.

The waters above the Firmament refer to the crystal sea which is in Heaven, and which serves as the symbolic boundary between Earth and Heaven. Thus, in creating the Firmament, God created a separation between Heaven and Earth.

This barrier of the firmament above the Heavens also finds its type in the Tabernacle of Moses and Solomon's Temple. The tabernacle and temple were architectural copies of Heaven and Earth. And in them, there was a curtain which sectioned off the Holy of Holies where the Ark of the Covenant was, from the Holy Place. Remember, access to the presence of God into the Holy of Holies was restricted only to the High Priest once a year on the Day of Atonement.

That curtain, or veil in the temple represented the watery barrier of the Crystal Sea which is above the firmament, and which separated Heaven and Earth.

When Mark says he saw the Heavens *being torn open*, he is referring to this watery veil that God put in place on the Second Day of Creation. At Christ's baptism, God is beginning to remove the watery barrier and reunite Heaven and Earth.

THE CURTAIN

But this is not all. When the text says that the Heavens were *torn open*, this word for torn - *schizo* - is only used one other time in Mark's Gospel, and at a key moment - when Jesus dies on the cross. It says in Mark 15:37-39-

"And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and breathed his last. Then the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. So when the centurion, who stood opposite from Him, saw that he cried out like this and breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God."

Jesus' baptism and His death on the cross are inseparable parts of His ministry. At His baptism, the Heavens were "torn open," signifying the union of Heaven and Earth. But this union, which

was begun in the waters of baptism, was fully accomplished on the cross, at which time the veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom. This tearing of the veil signified that God has removed the watery barrier between Heaven and Earth, and has now untied all things in Heaven and Earth in Jesus Christ. The torn veil testifies that the dwelling place of God is now with man.

As Colossians says: ¹⁹*For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell,* ²⁰*and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.*

IT WAS GOOD

I also remind you, that on the second day of creation, when God separated Heaven and Earth by creating the firmament in between the waters above and the waters below, that is the only day that God does not call “good.”

Why? Because God was waiting to call it good until the day when he would reunite Heaven and Earth again. The separation of Heaven from Earth was a temporary plan until the fullness of time when Jesus Christ would come and reunite all things in Heaven and Earth in Himself.

And this is what we see beginning at the Baptism of Jesus. Heaven and Earth becoming one again. Thus, when God says, *“This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased”* God is finally giving the long-anticipated approval which he did not utter on the second day. He now finally utters it in Jesus when Heaven and Earth begin to be reunited at Christ’s baptism.

Thus we see that God's ultimate plan from the very beginning of creation has been to unify Heaven and Earth in Jesus Christ. This is also testified to in Rev. 21,

21 Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea.

What sea is this? This is referring to the Crystal Sea in Heaven which I was just talking about. There is no more watery barrier above the firmament separating Heaven from Earth.

Why? Because it came to Earth in the person of the Holy Spirit at Christ's baptism. Jesus was not just baptized in the Jordan River but was baptized in the Heavenly Crystal Sea that came down in the Holy Spirit. Thus, when Christ was baptized, he sanctified the Jordan River, and all water, for a saving flood, for the mystical washing away of sins, as Luther's Baptismal prayer says.

Now what happens when there is no more sea separating Heaven from Earth, and God from Man? What happens when the Heavenly boundary comes to Earth sanctifying all water for a saving flood? It means that God is joining Heaven and Earth together into one.

² Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

⁵*Then He who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new."*

The New Creation of which the Lord Jesus speaks of here in Rev. 21 begins at His baptism. Heaven is torn open, and the Spirit of God comes to rest on Jesus bringing Heaven and Earth into union in the man Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, God has tabernacled among us. In Jesus, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He shall dwell with us, and we with Him. He shall be our God and we shall be His people.

I would like to humbly suggest that this image in Rev. 21 is not just something we are waiting for but is the reality now. Not in its fullness or totality, but still present now in Jesus and His Church.

Thus both events, the baptism, and the crucifixion of Jesus, are inseparably connected. Therefore Baptism becomes an effectual means of salvation to all who receive it by faith. For to receive baptism truly, is to receive the death of Christ on your behalf. You cannot have one and not the other.

ADOPTION

We also hear the language of adoption in Christ's baptism. Which is a comforting word that assures us of our future glorification. For at His baptism, God declared Jesus to be His Son, with whom He is well pleased.

Throughout the rest of Mark's gospel, nobody is certain who Jesus is, and he is constantly silencing the people telling them to be quiet about the miracles he performs. The demons and unclean spirits of course know who Jesus is, and Jesus silences them every time they speak about it. Because Christ does not

want the people to get the wrong idea about who the Son of God is.

Is he a miracle worker? Is He a teacher? Is he Elijah or one of the Prophets? He is the Son of God. But we must understand that title in light of those key events in Christ's life. God first speaks it at His baptism. And then God speaks again at the Transfiguration, saying "*This is my Son. Listen to Him.*"

And then finally, at the cross, when he saw how Christ died, the Centurion was the first person to rightly and finally confess that Jesus Christ truly is the Son of God.

And so what this tells us, people of God, is that according to Mark's Gospel, understanding Christ's identity as the Son of God can only be accurately understood in light of Christ's baptism, transfiguration, and crucifixion.

This passage has significant implications for us. It asserts that only through the sacrament of Baptism, which unites us into Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, can we truly come to know Christ and understand our identity in Him.

By being united to Christ, we come to know that we belong to God as His beloved sons and that our destiny in Christ is to receive the adoption of sons, the resurrection, and the glorification of our bodies, just like Christ's body was glorified at His Transfiguration, so long as we listen to Him.

In baptism God claims us as His own, belonging, with body and soul, in life and death, to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ. With his precious blood, He has fully cleansed us of all our sins, and redeemed us from all the power of the devil. In baptism, God

adopted you into His own family, making you his beloved sons, in whom He is well pleased.

And because we are sons of God, we await the day when God will deliver the creation itself from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the sons of God. For we who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the redemption of our bodies.

UNION WITH CHRIST

How does this happen? By Union with Christ in baptism.

Romans 6 says:

³Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? ⁴Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

Because Christ came to identify himself with sinful humanity in his baptism, crucifixion, and resurrection, when a person is baptized, they are truly united to Christ. Paul says that there is only One Baptism and that One Baptism is the Baptism of Jesus Christ. All other baptisms are participations in Christ's baptism.

Thus, because we are baptized into union with Christ in His baptism, all the benefits of salvation which are in Him, now belong to us. The Westminster Confession of Faith says: *“All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head by His Spirit and by faith, have fellowship with Him in His grace, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory.”*

And so when you were baptized, it was into Christ's baptism, and so you now have fellowship in Christ's death and be cleansed

from all your sins. You also have fellowship with Christ's resurrection, so you too could walk in newness of life. You also have fellowship with Christ's glory, so you have the assurance of the adoption of sons, the resurrection of the body.

All that is true of Christ is true for you, People of God, if you only receive it all with a believing heart. For baptism has been given to the people of God to assure us of what Christ has done for us, and to increase our faith. Not make us doubt. Nor vainly presume upon His grace without true faith. But by faith in Christ, and by the Holy Spirit, we are to believe what Christ says about us in Baptism, and thus we are to improve upon our baptisms, making our calling and election sure.

IMPROVING UPON OUR BAPTISMS

How do we improve upon our baptisms? The Westminster Larger Catechism says:

The needful but much neglected duty of improving our Baptism, is to be performed by us all our life long, especially in the time of temptation, and when we are present at the administration of it to others¹;

(How?) by serious and thankful consideration of the nature of it, and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby, and our solemn vow made therein²; by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary to, the grace of baptism, and our engagements³; by growing up to assurance of pardon of sin, and of all other blessings sealed to us in that sacrament⁴; by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized, for the mortifying of sin, and quickening of grace⁵; and by endeavoring to live by faith⁶, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness⁷, as those that have therein

given up their names to Christ⁷; and to walk in brotherly love, as being baptized by the same Spirit into one body⁸.

CONCLUSION

People of God, the baptism of the Lord Jesus Christ is your baptism. Therefore, whenever you reflect upon your baptism in the baptism of another, you are to remember that baptism is a sign and seal of God's promises to be your God and Father, and the God and Father of your children as well; of your cleansing from sin; of your dying to the sinful nature and rising to newness of life; of your mystical union and ingrafting into Christ by the Holy Spirit; and of your welcome and citizenship in the household of God, the Kingdom of Heaven.

Thus St. Mark was quite right to conclude his gospel with Jesus saying: *Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved. But whoever does not believe will be condemned.* So believe in Christ in your baptism, and be saved, and know for certain that if anyone is in Christ, New Creation. Amen.