

The Reverend Kathleen Killian  
Epiphany 1 Year A  
Matthew 3:13-17

*Pardon me, your “light” is showing*

In two short weeks Jesus is all grown up; from an infant at Mary’s breast to a man of some thirty years who is about to begin his ministry as his cousin John’s is about to end. The Baptist doesn’t know it, but he is soon to be imprisoned and beheaded by King Herod, though not before he baptizes Jesus—*the one*, John thunders to the crowds flocking to him, *who is more powerful than I—I am not fit to even carry his sandals—the one will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire!*

But for the moment, let’s leave John and Jesus on the banks of the river Jordan, so we can locate where we ourselves are: in part two of the Christmas mystery.

As Evelyn Underhill writes: *the Christmas mystery has two parts: the Nativity and the Epiphany; in the first we commemorate God’s humble entrance into human life . . . and in the second God’s manifestation [or epiphany] to the world. The first only happens so that the second may happen . . . the birth of Christ in our souls for a purpose beyond ourselves; because His Epiphany in the world must be through us; every real Christian part of the dust-laden air which shall radiate the glowing Epiphany [manifestation] of God, and catch and reflect His golden light.*

The Epiphany, from the Greek meaning *manifestation from above*, is a most ancient Christian festival that is celebrated on the twelfth night of Christmas or the 6th day of January, just passed, also known as 3 Kings Day in Hispanic and Latino culture.

In the Protestant church we observe a season of Epiphany that extends until Ash Wednesday, Epiphanytide most expressly the season of Christ's manifestation or showing to the nations, and the beginning of the proclamation of the gospel. This season of "shining forth" commences with the appearance of a most brilliant star—a never before seen star—that the 3 kings, wise men, or magi, the scholarly seers of the ancient world, notice in their "searching of the heavens" and are compelled by its luminous mystery to follow.

Throughout Epiphany our gospel stories are of such light and revelation, and ensuing shadows, scripture holding forth no delusion that the Son of God enters into a complex and brutal world. But nothing now is hidden and quieted away but made known, this season of "striking appearance" bookended by the baptism and transfiguration of Jesus, two events that show forth and reveal both the humility and glory of Jesus; and this is where we find ourselves this morning, with Jesus at his baptism by his cousin John.

But the question has long been asked: why would Jesus, the sinless one and God incarnate, submit to or let alone need a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins? And we're not the only ones wondering, because the Baptist also doesn't understand; he tries to dissuade Jesus, saying: *It is I who need baptism from you, and yet you come to me?! To which we hear Jesus speak the first words he utters in the gospel of Matthew: leave it like this for the time being; it is fitting that we should in this way fulfill all righteousness.*

The baptism of Jesus is recorded in all 4 gospels (inferred in the gospel of John 1:26-36), but only in Matthew do we hear an exchange between John and Jesus, and an answer to our quandary; Jesus responds that his baptism is to *fulfill all righteousness*, the themes of fulfillment and righteousness central to Matthew's gospel.

I read that in early parlance the word *righteousness* was spelled and pronounced *rightwiseness* (*Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*), which helped me to better understand a term that can seem rather remote or rigid. Far more than high-minded moral legality,

righteousness or rightwiseness is the divine knowing of God; sound wisdom whose compass points Godward but whose trajectory is also earthward; as Dr. Martin Luther Kings puts it, *the moral arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice*, or righteousness; this helped me understand that *all righteousness*—the whole everything and more of the right wisdom of God will be *fulfilled*—will be rendered complete, consummated, accomplished, carried out, obeyed, realized, and made manifest—in the baptism of Jesus by John; the ordinary elements of flesh and hands, earth and water suffused with the righteousness wisdom and will of God.

Ordinary, but archetypal symbols of birth and rebirth—the waters of Mary’s womb broken and flooding forth that God is born on earth; the Red sea parted for Moses that the exiled Israelites pass through them from slavery to freedom (Exodus 14:12); the waters of the Jordan parted for Joshua that all Israel crossed over on dry ground into the promised land (Joshua 3:14-17); and in the beginning, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the Spirit of God moved and brooded over the face of the waters (Genesis 1:2)—water and baptism speak to transformation and rite of passage.

Jesus’s life and ministry were indeed influenced, shaped, and nuanced by the rich symbology of Hebrew scripture, which he not only knew well and drew from but clearly felt personally addressed by them, as by the words of the prophet Isaiah, our Old Testament reading today:

*I have called you in righteousness;  
I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
a light to the nations,  
to open the eyes that are blind,  
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who sit in darkness.*

And, Jesus *is* plainly addressed and chosen:

*When Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*

This voice from heaven doesn't declare, *you* are my son as in the gospel of Mark and Luke, but *this* is my son; in what is more than a personal address but a public proclamation of who Jesus: *the beloved Son of God, God's Beloved*. We hear God's voice proclaim the same, near verbatim, at the end of the Epiphany season at Jesus' Transfiguration when the splendor of divinity bursts forth from Jesus' body, light spilling everywhere and engulfing the mountain and terrified disciples as the heavenly voice adds the imperative to *listen to my Son!* (Matthew 17:1-9). I wonder if John and the crowds were also awestruck at who came up from the waters and what came down from the above.

Early Christians also called baptism *illumination* or *enlightenment* (St. Justin Martyr First Apology), which I think this is an appropriate descriptor; for a person is informed and made aware through the catechesis, but more profoundly, while we are ritually drowned and buried in the baptismal waters with Christ, we emerge reborn in Christ who is the Light of the World; we are enlightened of Christ by water and Spirit.

Now, I don't remember my baptism, do you? Nor did I have any say about it since I was an baby. I wonder, does everyone *want* to be "enlightened"? I wonder too, did I have any sense of what was really going on other than not-my-mother was getting my head wet?

In early Christianity, being baptized was a long and serious process of induction and education into the mysteries of faith undertaken at a mature age, as it still is and can be though in different ways. Infant baptism however tends to be the norm (though not in the Book of Common Prayer), and more of a cultural and social custom—a just in cast insurance policy— than a spiritual and religious ritual that requires attentive follow through.

But, we must remember that the activity of the Holy Spirit of God is not limited to a rite performed in a church or on a river bank; and that regardless of tribe, culture, or language, all creatures created by God are chosen, called, and embraced by their Creator; as Peter tells us in our Epistle: *I truly understand that God shows no partiality*. And to quote Evelyn Underhill again: *the Epiphany means the free pouring out of a limitless light. . . not its careful communication to those whom we hold worthy to receive it*.

We are not privy to the multiplicity of the ways and means of divine initiation into the mysteries of incarnate and eternal life. But we do know that we share in the one body of Christ; and that our baptism is not exclusively individually ours, but rather belongs to and is part of the one baptism of Jesus. This gives me great comfort; that though I can't recall baptism, I can and do so by remembering and looking back to Jesus' baptism, which is inclusive of all baptisms.

After Jesus himself was baptized, *he was led by the same spirit who descended upon him into the desert to be put to the test by the devil—that Holy Spirit of wind of fire*. Upon his return from the wilderness, in Matthew 5, Jesus teaches his new disciples, as he teaches us now:

*You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before all others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

Jesus sends us out into the world to live out the Incarnation—which means the essential holiness of all things—to manifest the light of Christ in all of our joys and in all of our sorrows. Amen.

But first: Jesus climbs out of the river onto the banks of the Jordan, water rolling off his body, prayers off his lips; wet, a little cold, but anointed by the Spirit and affirmed by God—for each and all of us. I would guess that he, John, and the crowd were mostly speechless. And then: Jesus takes a first even shaky step towards the *fulfillment of all righteousness*; that he heal, preach, teach, and *shine forth* the immeasurable Truth of God's Light.