

Epiphany and Baptism

This is quite a week!

Last Sunday we celebrated the feast of the holy name of Jesus, remembering the importance of our names, particularly our secret name.

Then, just two days ago, was the feast of the Epiphany, symbolized by the Magi, who are making their way from far away Iran, with their far away religious beliefs and traditions, to stand by the manger, gazing upon a deeper truth.

And today, we celebrate our Lord's baptism, by that strange and unsettling prophet, John, on the banks of the river Jordan.

So let's begin at the beginning.

What is Epiphany?

You might say it's God's invitation to the whole world to come and discover the deepest depths of truth and beauty and love.

And what is baptism?

Baptism is humanity's response to that invitation.

Let's be clear: all of the world's different religions and faiths have insight into ultimate truth.

And yet, the unimaginable strangeness of the source of all being becoming a naked infant, lying in a trough, takes all of the truths that all of humanity has ever intuited from the beginning of time, and brings us all home to the very wellspring.

To the deepest place.

To the most fundamental place.

It's something that one of the Magi came to see as an old man,
years after his journey.

Remembering that journey so long ago, he held his grandson tight,
saying:

 "A cold coming we had of it,
 just the worst time of the year for a journey,
 and such a long journey:
 the ways deep and the weather sharp,
 the very dead of winter.
[We] arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
 Finding the place;
 it was (you may say) satisfactory.
All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
 This set down
 This:
 were we led all that way for Birth
 or Death?
 There was a Birth, certainly,
 We had evidence and no doubt.
 I had seen birth and death,
but had thought they were different;
 This Birth was hard
 and bitter agony for us,
 Like death
 Our death."

TS Elliot, The Journey of the Magi

Hold that thought for just a moment.

Hold onto the intertwining of birth and death, as you perhaps wonder that if God reveals God's-self in all manner of ways, to all manner of people, then why are we here?

Why do we put on the mantle of Christianity?

Why do we claim Jesus as the savior?

After all, there are such deep truths in other faiths.

The Hindus, for example, believe in one supreme God, but they also believe in a whole series of lesser gods.

Might we be better off if we accepted some of that Hindu thinking?

So that instead of naming things like the Pentagon and capitalism and our consumer society as simply "the way things are," isn't it more honest to acknowledge that they are, in fact, our modern day gods, to whom we are deeply devoted?

We pay homage to these gods with the sweat of our brow, with taxes and wages and dog eat dog competition.

We even risk annihilation from these gods in the ever looming threat of nuclear war and a climate polluted with our engines of industry — all because we lack faith in the true God to ensure our need for abundance and safety and well being.

Perhaps, if we actually named such things as gods, we could see them for what they are: false gods, and reject them.

And the Buddhists, with their insistence on surrender and letting things go also have so very much to teach us.

Every Christmas Pope Francis gathers his Cardinals together at the Vatican, and reads them the riot act, portraying a church hierarchy consumed by narcissism and the pathology of power, exchanging optimism and service and joy for a hardened, sterile face.

He does so because he wants them to recognize that it's the people who think they are the most spiritually developed, and the closest to God, who are in fact in the most dangerous place imaginable.

After all, who nailed Jesus to the cross?

Wasn't it those who were absolutely certain that they were doing God's will?

So from the Buddhists, might we adopt the prayer that says, "give me a beginner's mind?"

And yet, while we can, and should draw from the wisdom of other faiths, we are, nevertheless, followers of Christ.

And the question becomes, why?

And the answer to that question is where baptism comes in.

Because, like that old Magi came to see, death is at the very center of life.

And only Christianity, of all the great faiths, faces that truth square in the eyes.

In baptism, we move from the petty and the selfish and the stupid into a way of living that seeks the best for each other.

We begin to live with regular and rigorous self-examination.

And from all of this flows the conviction that what we cannot do for ourselves, God can do for us.

But to get there, some dying needs to happen.

A bishop gives a baptism class in the Deep South.

He reads from Paul's letter to the Romans:

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

We were buried with him by baptism into death.

Our old self was crucified, we have died with Christ." Rom. 6.

The bishop is greeted with blank stares.

Desperately, he asks: "Has anyone here died to become a Christian?"

I know we didn't pour enough water on you to kill you when you were baptized, but did any of you have to die?"

A timid hand comes up, and the white man says:

'When the schools in Jackson were integrated, I thought I would die.

I knew enough to know that on the day black children went to school with our children, the world I knew was dead.

But now, my black neighbor is my best friend.'

An old world dies, but a new world is born." Willimon, Peculiar Speech, 14.

And then there is the woman who was terrified of sleeping alone in her home when her husband went on business trips.

If he left, she always took the kids to a friend's house to spend the night, so deep was her fear and anxiety.

And then her daughter died of leukemia, and she never again was afraid to be home alone.

When someone asked why, she replied:

"Well, when you've died, what else is there to fear?"

When you've had to let go of your most precious possession, what else could happen that would be worse?" Id. at 15.

And perhaps that is the heart of baptism.

While we often speak of our faith as a slow growing process; it is just as often some kind of loss or injury – or death – that really gets the whole journey on its way.

In ways I will never understand, it seems we need this kind of crisis, because without the crisis, we just don't develop the eyes to see the new world that God invites us into.

Without a broken heart, we tend to see only the obvious: things like jobs and family obligations and wounded feelings.

It's the hard smack of death, that comes in so many different ways, that helps us enter a world where kindness reigns.

Where forgiveness is the path to peace.

Where violence is rejected.

Where friendship is the norm.

It takes the death of the world we know to find ourselves in God's new world.

The old Magi saw that.

Baptism is the gateway into this new world.

The world that God creates.

The world intended for each of us since the beginning of time.

That dying to what I want — in favor of what others need — turns out to be the key to God's Kingdom.

This is God's Epiphany.

This is our baptism.

+amen.

