

THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER

January 12, 2025



BAPTISM

as new direction

by Drew Downs

The earliest followers of Jesus referred to themselves as “followers of The Way.” Before the word Christian would be associated with them, a word that was first derogatory before it was claimed as a positive description. Those first followers did not see themselves as merely people following the Messiah, but as living in the way that he set out for them. A way that was of a wholly different character from the way of the world around them.

We often treat the sacrament of baptism as an entrance rite, but it is something more like an expression of participation, a reflection of something that happens on the inside, of turning toward The Way in faith and hope. It is an expression that is in opposition to the norms of power, wealth, and war and in solidarity with the poor and disadvantaged knowing that we make this journey alongside others, making new friends in faith, hope, justice, and peace.

AFTER THE EPIPHANY

2025

WHAT'S GOING ON

*"You know we've got to find a way
To bring some loving here today".*

-Marvin Gaye

Disciples, Apostles, and Saints!

After the Storm

I was watching the weather reports from Lake Junaluska, North Carolina, just west of Asheville. It was in the fifties through the weekend, hitting sixty on Monday before dipping into a chilly New Year's night for us. Light snow fell, making the tight roads in Asheville more menacing to think about than to traverse.

I'm loathe to cancel services. I fondly remember one Sunday, sliding down 7th most of the way to the church, preparing for the 8:00, and having one person show up. I asked if they wanted to do the service together and we chose to talk instead, preparing for the 10:00. By then, the roads had cleared and the sun started to do its thing, and we had a modest turn out.

Since I wasn't in town yet—I'd be driving home Saturday evening—I wasn't going to be watching it closely. I asked our wardens to make the call, saying that I would be prepared for any of it.

What I said to them was that 95% of the time, I assume we have the service and just tell people not to show up. It seems funny to think about—discouraging people from coming to church—but the point is to minimize the danger while supporting the ones who do show up. In the end, this storm was in that 5% of cases in which expecting anyone to drive is a bad call.

I don't expect us to have this happen again for awhile. But if it does, know that we consider your safety to be more important than your attendance. So don't drive when you shouldn't.

With love,
Drew

AFTER THE EPIPHANY

2025

FOR SUNDAY

Advent 4C

December 22, 2024

Collect

Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting.

Amen.

Reading

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Reflection

We return in this first Sunday after the Epiphany to a scene we encountered in Advent, just a few weeks ago, when John the Baptist was drawing people to the wilderness with a message of repentance and baptism. This message isn't so much heard by Jesus as it is embodied—that he would come forward in grace to be a part of this grace.

There is a recurring theme in Christian thought about the nature of Jesus and his participation in such earthly and human things. That people of faith have wondered from the beginning why Jesus would *need* to be baptized. And the easy answer from tradition responds that Jesus doesn't *actually* need to be baptized—he's perfect—so there is no need. But that the *world* needs his participation in it.

In Eastern tradition, the place of the baptism of Jesus is paramount. It was the inspiration for the ancient feast of the Epiphany and serves as a nexus point in the life and ministry of Jesus. For it isn't the birth of Jesus that sets things off, but Jesus's baptism, for it is from here that everything else unspools.

The baptism also serves as a leverage point in Christian theology. For the Western church, Jesus's divinity is present at birth—making his divinity and humanness an innate tension from the beginning. Some Eastern traditions offered the baptism as the origin of the divinity, that the Holy Spirit embodies Jesus in baptism and empowers him to do the miraculous things he will soon offer the world.

The essential truth virtually every tradition offers us is that the baptism of Jesus is a central, foundational story in the life of Jesus and the beginning of his messianic work. It compels us to see his movement, not just his person, as the essential character of Christ. And we can all join him in this movement the same way he did.

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