

Baptism of Our Lord Sermon
The Rev. Megan Dembi

Just a few days ago was the feast of the Epiphany, the commemoration of Christ, the light of the world, coming to earth and revealing himself to the Gentiles. On that day we hear the account of the wise men who had somehow learned of the birth of a child who was to be king of the Jews by observing the rising of a certain star. These wise men, though they were gentiles, wished to visit this child and pay him homage. Yet when they sought out King Herod to help them find the child's whereabouts, Herod was afraid. He requested that the wise men send word once they found this child, claiming he wished to also pay this King homage, yet Herod was secretly planning on killing this child that could possibly threaten his rule. These wise men did find this child by following this mysterious star, and knelt down upon meeting this child, giving him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Yet once they found this child they chose to return to their homeland without telling Herod of this child's whereabouts, as they had a dream warning them of Herod's intentions.

This event was of utmost importance, not only because it foreshadowed Jesus' divine kingship, and not only because the wise men foiled Herod's plot, but also because of what this event represented. The wise men claimed that Christ was the king of the Jews. And Jewish scriptures had foretold the birth of the messiah who would be born of the line of David, who would be the King of the Jews. Yet the Epiphany reveals a greater truth about this long-awaited messiah. Though this messiah inherited David's kingship, he was not King to the Jews alone, but king to all—even the gentiles. These wise men who had learned of this miraculous birth through the movement of a distant star were alerted to this momentous event because this King's coming affected the entire world. Through his coming all of humanity was saved, the entire world was redeemed, and the power of sin and death were vanquished. All this was to be accomplished by this messiah, this King of Kings, God incarnate living in this world in human form and being tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin.

And soon after the celebration of those events which we commemorate on the feast of the Epiphany we celebrate the event we heard of today—the baptism of our Lord—the baptism of the messiah, the King of Kings, God incarnate in the world. Yet many wonder why Christ, whom we affirm is without sin, was baptized at all. What use could it be to baptize someone who has no need to be baptized? Well John, Christ's second cousin and the one whom scripture foretold would prepare the way of the Lord, seemed to have had trouble understanding this himself. When Christ came to the Jordan River to be baptized by John, John was resistant at first. He told Christ, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Yet Jesus was not deterred by John's confusion and insisted John baptize him. And so John did. And through this we learn what true baptism is.

Before this event, John had been preaching repentance to prepare the way of the Lord, encouraging people to confess their sins. John told those who would listen, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." And it is through Christ's baptism that we first see this—this true baptism—this baptism not only by water, but also with the Holy Spirit. For just as Jesus came up from the water after having been baptized, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. Christ's was the first baptism at which the Holy Spirit descended upon the one who was baptized. But it would be far from the last.

Just as Christ was born, not for his own benefit, but for the benefit of humanity, so too Christ was baptized, not for his own benefit, but for the benefit of humanity. We believe that through our baptisms we receive the Holy Spirit and are initiated into the body of Christ. Through baptism we receive the forgiveness of sins and are raised to a new life of grace, assured that we will be inheritors

of the everlasting life that Christ won for us through his death and resurrection. Though Christ had no need to be baptized, we needed to have a model to show us what true baptism is. And Christ's baptism shows us that.

Yet, even with this example, in the history of the church there have been many misunderstandings about baptism. Many of you have probably heard about the practice of people trying to delay their baptisms to be as close to their deaths as possible. This is because many once believed that baptism only conferred forgiveness of sins that had been committed before the baptism actually took place—as if God's saving power could not reach beyond the bounds of time. Yet now we more fully understand the gifts conferred to us at the sacrament of baptism—the initiation into the body of Christ, the forgiveness of sins, the assurance of everlasting life, are, like God, eternal and without end. Others still do believe that the only way to obtain forgiveness of sins and everlasting life is to be baptized, and that those who are not baptized will not ever be able to enter the kingdom of heaven—as if God's saving power is limited in any way by what we humans do in this world. Yet now many more fully understand that, though we are assured through scripture that baptism initiates us into the body of Christ and all that Christ obtained for humanity and the whole world, that we cannot presume to claim that God is in any way limited by whether or not a person undergoes this sacrament. God, the All Wise and All Powerful, cannot be hindered.

Yes, through the example of Christ's baptism and through the church's continued learning about baptism, we have come to more fully know how the sacrament of baptism transforms us—how the promises obtained through baptism last forever and cannot be rescinded. Through our baptisms we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own *forever!* And because of these gifts that have been conferred upon us, we pledge to Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with all who are baptized in his eternal priesthood. Let us reaffirm all that we believe and all that we have promised by renewing the vows of our baptism. Please turn to page 304 in the Book of Common Prayer.