

## EPIPHANY 1, JAN. 13, 2019, Year C

- Like the circumstances of Jesus' birth, the event of his Baptism is *rooted in history*. In various ways, the Gospels are keen to make this point. Both his birth and his Baptism have important meaning *not only for* those who see these events as matters of faith. The Gospels present these events as *facts* ~ as *facts to be understood in relation to other historical facts*, and are events which therefore have significance *for everyone*, both *then* and *now*. Our Gospels present these and other events as *facts* which should shape our lives.
- Yet, it's common today for people to look at religion as if it's primarily *subjective, rather than as anchored in history*, and in the actions and declarations of God. This leads to a *false assumption* ~ that, even though people find faith compelling and personally effective, *religious beliefs and practices are always particular to individuals*. And *therefore that these beliefs and practices have no objective supernatural or historical reference points outside ourselves upon which they rest*. Do we perceive what has been *lost* with this shift in understanding?
- We can make the matter clear by asking a simple question: *for what are we willing to die?* Likely answers include *our families, and our freedom* to make personal choices without coercion. *But what if I am kidnapped by someone whose ideology is militantly anti-Christian? What if I am told I must convert to another faith, or die? Would I still confess boldly* the central truths in our Gospel, and liturgy, today ~ that Jesus is the Son of God, the Beloved, in whom the Father is well-pleased?<sup>1</sup> For thousands of people in the world today, *the question of forced conversion is not theoretical*. Everyday, people are tortured and killed *because of* their religious and political beliefs. Many of them are Christians, who are willing to die rather than renounce their faith.
- This has been true throughout history, and it is a poignant aspect of the Christmas and Epiphany Gospels. [Peter Koenig's wonderful Tryptich](#)

## EPIPHANY 1, JAN. 13, 2019, Year C

painting, *Christmas–Epiphany*, helps make this clear {note handout}. The death of Jesus is intimately connected with *the death and anticipated resurrection of others*. The lamb that was slain becomes the Temple at the center of *the New Jerusalem*, from which the rivers of *the water of life* flow. The wine at the *wedding at Cana* prefigures the same supernatural refreshment, for which *St. Stephen* was willing to die. And the Twelve Days of Christmas also include *Holy Innocents' Day*, the feast commemorating those killed by Herod in his search to eliminate the baby Jesus as a potential rival. *Jesus' Baptism* declares his vocation, a vocation which involves each of these things and *more*.

- An equally real but more *subtle* threat is increasingly evident in our society ~ *radical secularism*. When the culture around us *no longer supports* our religious faith, it becomes *intolerant*. People then begin to act *with hostility* against our faith. As a result, at least two things happen. *We soften our religious commitments* so we *fit-in better* with others. *And, we lose confidence* that the Gospel (*or other faith that we have*) has *world-wide* significance, *for all* human beings. As a result, *we draw back from practicing our faith*, a faith that has *public* implications. We then retreat to *private* beliefs that *now only have personal and spiritual* meaning.
- Think for a moment about John 3:16: "*For God so loved the world...*" The Greek behind these words has *sweeping* implications. *For God so loved the cosmos* (the whole creation), that he gave his only Son... in order that the cosmos might be saved through him.<sup>2</sup> In other words, *for John, the Gospel has universal implications, not just personal, spiritual* significance. This is a gospel for which *we might be willing to die*, precisely because it is *first of all* a gospel for which *we are willing to live*.
- It is imprecise and misleading therefore to say that *'faith changes the world.'* Instead, we should say that *God changes the world, in part through people of faith*. We have faith in *the God who created, and then inhabited, the whole cosmos*. *And, our God has acted for the sake of the whole cosmos*.

## EPIPHANY 1, JAN. 13, 2019, Year C

For we believe that, as the Psalmist says, “the voice of the LORD is a *powerful* voice; the voice of the LORD is a voice of *splendor*.”<sup>3</sup> *This voice is the Word that became flesh* and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.<sup>4</sup>

- We gather here this morning to enact two rituals that reflect and embody this *cosmos-impacting gospel*. In some parts of the world today, either one of these practices could lead to imprisonment or even death. We reaffirm our Baptismal faith with the words of the Baptismal Covenant, in which we *recommit* ourselves to live a new life. *And*, through the rite of Baptism, we also receive a new member into Christ’s Body, the Church. With all of us as witness-participants, Jessica and Ryan Roberts present their daughter, Maeve, who in the font *will die to the powers of this world*, and be raised to a new life in Christ.
- We need to consider *how and why* the powers of this world see these acts as *provocative and offensive*. Because in some places, *these rituals are not simply ignored as having only private spiritual significance*. Part of the answer lies in our Gospel this morning. The Good News about the Messiah involves *the promise of world-impacting power and might*. John the Baptizer says, “I baptize you with water; but one who is *more powerful* than I is coming;... He will baptize you *with the Holy Spirit and fire*. His winnowing fork is in his hand, ... and... the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”<sup>5</sup> *King Herod and his supporters rightly perceive that they are impugned by these words*. For, as Tom Wright points out, *not all kings in the birth narratives bring gifts to honor the Messiah*.<sup>6</sup> Those who oppose John’s ministry and imprison him, or who want to kill the newborn king, *prefigure* those in later history, *and even today*, who seek to imprison or kill God’s people.
- Here is the paradox: the more *truly* the *power* of the Gospel is *proclaimed*, the more it *threatens* those who are wedded to *lesser powers*, and to the *false deities of this world*.<sup>7</sup> God says to everyone who has come through the Red Sea crossing, through the Jordan River, *and* through the baptismal font,

## EPIPHANY 1, JAN. 13, 2019, Year C

"You are my child, *my beloved*; and with you I am well-pleased." As people who have been created and redeemed in the image and likeness of God, by crossing through these waters, our dignity and worth are recognized and proclaimed. This implies that all pretenders to the role of granting dignity and worth, like Roman Imperial officials, are *just that* ~ *pretenders*.

- People and institutions in the culture around us are becoming *impatient with how we perceive the implications of our faith*. If we are *not* content to see our faith as simply *an inward and private* experience, *then* our faith and adherence to it will become *inconvenient*. *Our faith will be perceived as an impediment to the world's advancing projects*. We need to be prepared for adversity! One thing is becoming more apparent ~ that *if* we believe in a gospel for which we we want to *live*, it may become a gospel for which we *might* have to *die*.
- Realizing this, today's words from Isaiah express the ground for our hope: "*Thus says the Lord... : Do not fear*, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, *I will be with you*; ... when you walk through fire you shall not be burned... For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."<sup>8</sup>



Peter Koenig, *Advent–Christmas*

**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."

## EPIPHANY 1, JAN. 13, 2019, Year C

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> In relation to these words from our Gospel today, see the text of the Collect, in which we prayed these words: "Grant that all who are baptized in his Name may... boldly confess him as Lord and Savior."

<sup>2</sup> See John 3:16-17.

<sup>3</sup> Portions of Psalm 29, our Psalm for today.

<sup>4</sup> See John 1.

<sup>5</sup> From our Gospel, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22.

<sup>6</sup> For this observation, I am indebted to N.T. Wright's book, *Twelve Months of Sundays*, and his commentary on the texts appointed for this day.

<sup>7</sup> See N.T. Wright, *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> From Isaiah 43:1-7.