

EPIPHANY 1, Jan. 12, 2020, Year A

- The increasing **secularism** of our society has many consequences. One of them is now *more evident in our churches*. Fewer *infants* are being **Baptized**, and fewer *children Confirmed*, *merely because of* social expectations or family customs. At the same time, *more adults are seeking Baptism through a personal choice*, following *conversion*. This fits how *adult Baptism was the prevalent model in the Early Church*. And our *Prayer Book* Baptismal Rite is based upon it. *And so*, even when we Baptize infants –*as we shall do today*– our willingness to **Baptize a child** is based upon *an adult profession of faith*. Lucy DeWit will be Baptized today *in accord with Matt and Emily's adult profession of faith* –as well as that of her family and sponsors. Because Matt and Emily *not only believe*, but also *live the Faith*, we have *an assurance* ~ an assurance that *Lucy will grow up believing and living the Faith herself*.
- I have always been grateful for having been **Baptized as an adult**. This is because it has helped me to appreciate *what is at stake* in this sacrament. **Baptism** always involves an *ending* as well as a *beginning*. It occasions an *ending* of the sovereignty of *sin* in our lives. Just as it signals *a beginning to living* in the Kingdom of God. Today, *Lucy DeWit will not be so conscious of this as we hope to be*. But over time, along with her parents, her communities of faith can help her experience the power of this truth.
- For me, *having been baptized following an adult conversion experience*, I was keenly aware of an *ending* as well as of a *beginning*. In fact, *a lingering fear* about *what might be ending* kept me from being Baptized as soon as I might have. For up until then, *I devoted myself to art and to architecture*. My identity was wrapped up in my vocation as a student of art. **Conversion** awkwardly *disrupted my settled sense of this identity, just as it should have*. At first, I did not understand this. Yet, as I came to see, I was accepting the *Lordship of Christ*, and admitting his role as **Redeemer** of the world. This was not simply *adding* something to my life, as I might have added a new blazer to my wardrobe. As I began to perceive, *conversion would mean a*

EPIPHANY 1, Jan. 12, 2020, Year A

giving up something *within* me; not simply taking taking on another. For at least in principle, accepting Christ as Lord would mean *renouncing Me* as Lord. That is a *very hard thing* to do!

- Here is *the critical point* with regard to Lucy. Being baptized as an infant will not necessarily *spare her this crisis of identity*. Because, as we learn from the kind of ministry that Matt *does so well*, the transition from childhood into adolescence involves **questioning**. And, *among the things questioned* is this matter of **identity**, especially in relation to **family** and **faith**. *Do I have this family and this faith simply because I was born to them? Or is my connection to them deeper, and integral to who I am, and to who I am becoming?* (pause)
- “**Out of the waters of death into a new covenant life with God.**” Think of the *deeply biblical historical* significance of this phrase! Think of **Creation** from chaos into beautiful order... And then, of its repetition in **the Flood experience of Noah** and his family. Think **Moses** and **Israel’s Red Sea passage** through the waters of death into a new covenant life with God. Think of **Israel’s symbolic journey across the Jordan**, *re-living* this pattern. And then think of **John the Baptizer**, inviting **sons and daughters of the covenant** to come across the Jordan, and re-enter **the Promised Land as if for the first time**. In each case, there is *a death* to one *condition or circumstance*, and *a birth* to another.
- This theme *lies at the heart* of the readings we hear during this extended season. And they are expressed beautifully but also mystically in the central panel of Peter Koenig’s great painting, *Christmas–Epiphany*. I invite you to look at it now, and hope you will *carry it home* with you and *take time to ‘read’* its extensive imagery.

EPIPHANY 1, Jan. 12, 2020, Year A

- The most obvious connection it has with the readings for today can be found in the lower righthand portion of the panel, where we find **Jesus and John the Baptizer**. Here, we see *Jesus submitting to the waters of Baptism*, in *an event that begs a question*. It's a question Matthew anticipates in his Gospel. For *why would Jesus be baptized?* Matthew tells us, in Peterson's Message translation, that '**John objected, "I'm the one who needs to be baptized, not you!"** But Jesus insisted. *"Do it. God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism."* So John did it.¹ **Jesus saw the Big Picture. The pattern was being fulfilled. Out of the waters of a kind of death, a spiritual death, would come a new birth for God's people.**
- Peter Koenig beautifully depicts this *in a very subtle way*. If you look closely *at the bottom right corner of the panel*, you will see some **skulls lying at the river bottom, among the reeds, below the baptismal waters**. You may recall seeing a skull at the base of the cross in Orthodox icons of the Crucifixion, as well as in western art. This represents **Adam** and **our fallen human nature**.² Yet these skulls may also represent those *Egyptians who perished in the waters of the Red Sea*, when Israel was delivered into a new covenant life with God.
- Based on the Gospels, we know that **Jesus was baptized in the waters of the Jordan**. But here, *other biblically significant water* is represented. At the center of the painting, Koenig depicts *John's Revelation-vision of the Lamb on the throne, who is the source of Living Water*.³ Around this throne, the faithful departed and the saints who have gone before are gathered in praise and adoration. *Koenig then connects this theme of living water with the Cana wedding story, where we hear of water stored in large jars for the rites of purification*.⁴ There, Jesus performs his *first* miracle, *turning this holy water into wonderfully good wine*.

EPIPHANY 1, Jan. 12, 2020, Year A

- Here we see the mystical connection between the **Old Testament** and the **New**, and between **Baptism** and **Eucharist**. All this is relevant today, not only *for Lucy* in her new life in Christ, but also *for every one of us*. *We are hearers of the Gospel record of Jesus' Baptism*. Hearing this story ~ *really hearing it*, we are challenged to *live* into it, and *as more than admirers* of either Jesus or John. We are called to go through *these same waters* with him, the waters of death to our old ways of life. And with him, *we are lifted up to live into a new covenant life with God*, in God's new Jerusalem.
- *As John puts it in the Revelation*, in words so important to this parish church: "Then I saw... *the holy city, the new Jerusalem*, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared *as a bride* adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
 "*See, the home of God is among mortals.*
 He will dwell with them;
 they will be his peoples,
 and God himself will be with them;
 he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
 Death will be no more..."

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "*See, I am making all things new.*" ... Then he said to me, "*It is done!* I am the Alpha and the Omega, the *beginning* and the *end*. *To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.*"⁵



Peter Koenig, *Christmas–Epiphany*

Matthew 3:13-17

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. [John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”](#) But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And 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.”

Notes:

¹ See The Message translation of our Gospel passage, which may be found on the website, Bible Gateway: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+3%3A13-17&version=MSG>

² See, for example, the article, “Human Skull Symbolism” on the Wikipedia website: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_skull_symbolism (especially the reference to, and image of, Fra Angelico’s 1435 *Crucifixion*).

³ See Revelation 21:1-6.

⁴ See John, chapter 2:1ff.

⁵ See endnote #3, above.