

Sermon for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, January 14, 2018

An Epiphany Procession with Carols

Saint Thomas Church, New York City

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Matthew 2:1–12; Luke 3:15–17, 21–22; John 2:1–11

Unraveling the origins of early Christian festivals means wading backwards, as it were, through how the gospel lessons, and the celebrations they inspired, were understood by the generations of Christians who came before us. In the Christian West, second-century Christian writer and teacher Justin Martyr wrote that the wise men were kings from Arabia.¹ Matthew’s gospel, of course, doesn’t mention “kings”; he speaks of “Magi”—probably best understood as Persian wise men, priests, astrologers.²

Augustine of Hippo, who died in the year 430, is credited with influencing the thirteenth day after Jesus’ birth as the date of the Magis’ visit;³ but there is no chronology in the gospel. Augustine’s homilies on the Epiphany were also influential in associating their visit

¹ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 115.

² *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “μάγος,” 608–09.

³ Luz, 116.

with the Church's mission to the Gentiles.⁴ And what were believed to be the relics of the three kings were moved from Milan to the cathedral in Cologne in the year 1164.⁵ Relics by that time were well on their way to being a hallmark of Western Christian devotion in the Middle Ages.

We Episcopalians, most of us here probably children of the twentieth century, should not forget the role the hymn “We three kings” has played in shaping what comes to mind when we hear the word “Epiphany.” That word “epiphany” in New Testament Greek means simply, “the act of appearing.”⁶ The Feast of the Epiphany at first was about both the birth and the baptism of Jesus.⁷ And it's in the Christian East that the celebration of the Epiphany has its origins.

The earliest records for this celebration on January 6 come from the late second or early third century.⁸ With the great theological debates of the fourth and

⁴ Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), 155.

⁵ Luz, 116.

⁶ *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “ἐπιφάνεια,” 385–86.

⁷ Bradshaw and Johnson, 137.

⁸ *Ibid.*

fifth centuries—how to speak about Christ’s humanity and divinity; how to speak about the Trinity—the Epiphany in the East becomes all about Christ’s baptism.⁹

I want to say something about the stories of Jesus’ baptism. Because of the difficulties three of our four evangelists have with the idea of Jesus being baptized, these narratives probably represent the most historical record of a first Epiphany of the Son of God.

Mark, the earliest gospel, written around the year 70,¹⁰ is the gospel where Jesus’ baptism is not a problem for the evangelist. His baptismal narrative begins, “John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance leading to the forgiveness of sins”¹¹—here I follow the translation of Dr. Joel Marcus, professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Duke Divinity School.

⁹ Ibid., 150–51.

¹⁰ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 127.

¹¹ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, Anchor Bible 27 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 149.

Simple for Mark, but, again, challenging for Matthew,¹² Luke,¹³ and John. How could the Son of God have needed to, or submitted to, a public bath, a public washing, that would lead to the forgiveness of sins? And by a mere prophet?

Matthew, like Luke, writing with Mark in front of him,¹⁴ about ten years after Mark wrote,¹⁵ provided a dialogue where John objects to baptizing Jesus, who then responds, “Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.”¹⁶

In John, the last of the four gospels written—probably a decade after Matthew and Luke¹⁷ and for a very different community,¹⁸ Jesus is not baptized at all, but recognized as the one “who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.”¹⁹ The Son of God, the Word made flesh, the One who was in the beginning with God and who was God, needed no washing by a prophet. This evening we have Luke’s story of Jesus’ baptism, and it is a step

¹² Brown, 177.

¹³ Ibid., 236.

¹⁴ Ibid., 203–05.

¹⁵ Ibid., 216–17.

¹⁶ Matthew 3:15.

¹⁷ Brown, 334.

¹⁸ Ibid., 373–76.

¹⁹ John 1:33.

away from the stories of Mark and Matthew, but not as far a step as John.

In Luke, there's no dialogue between John and Jesus. Luke's gospel simply says, "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, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, 'Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.'"²⁰ It doesn't say John baptized Jesus.²¹ It's easy to miss the dodge if you're not looking for it. That said, there's every reason to think and believe that Mark and Matthew are right: God's prophet John the Baptist baptized the Son of God.

Last month as I was doing some study for Advent preaching, I realized that God never asked Mary for her permission, or agreement, to be the mother of his Son. In Luke, the angel Gabriel simply tells Mary what God is going to do: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow

²⁰ Luke 3:21–22.

²¹ "Thus Luke avoids any subordination of Jesus to JBap, who is not even mentioned in the following baptismal scene," Brown, 236, n.

you.”²² In Matthew, when Joseph is told in a dream, “that which is conceived in Mary is of the Holy Spirit.”²³ Mary’s already with child. Her role does not arise as an issue for Matthew. I don’t want to look down the road, as it were, of predestination, but I do want to acknowledge that every human life is precious to God.

The late New Testament professor François Bovon—an ordained minister of two of the Swiss Reformed Churches, who taught for many years at Harvard Divinity School; he died in 2013—wrote, “For Luke the ‘heart’ is the location of will and of thought . . . In it dwell both decisions and questions.”²⁴ I’d like to suggest to you and to myself that our journey in life is not about seeking God, but about opening our awareness to how God has been, and is, seeking us. The Epiphany God seeks for humankind is, in the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, “to glorify him and enjoy him forever.”²⁵

²² Luke 1:35.

²³ Matthew 1:20.

²⁴ François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, trans. Christine Thomas, Hermeneia, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 125.

²⁵ <http://www.westminsterconfession.org/confessional-standards/the-westminster-shorter-catechism.php>, (accessed 14 January 2018).

I close with a short quotation from a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke that speaks to me, quoted by Bishop Frank Griswold in his really good new book, *Tracking Down the Holy Ghost*:

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart, and try to love the questions themselves . . . Do not seek the answers . . . Live the questions . . . Perhaps then, you will gradually, without noticing it, live . . . into the answer.”²⁶

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Copyright © 2018 The Society of the Free Church of St. Mary the Virgin, New York, New York.

All rights reserved.

²⁶ *Tracking Down the Holy Ghost: Reflections on Love and Longing* (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), 20. See also Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Mark Harmon (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 45–56.