Sermon January 7, 2018

Mark 1:4-11

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Welcome to the season of Epiphany, which extends from now until the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday.

This is the season we celebrate the many ways Christ’s divinity was manifested in the events recorded in the gospels, such as Jesus’ baptism by John, the calling of the disciples, the wedding in Cana, and other events.

Merriam Webster defines the word Epiphany as:

“the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi”.

Until the Magi appear on the scene (which we read in Matthew’s gospel), the stories surrounding Jesus’ birth were centered on his Jewish heritage; the Davidic line.

Then the Magi appear, telling us that those living outside of Jesus’ family and community also acknowledge him as the Messiah.

Have you heard people say, “I’ve had an epiphany?”

When they say this they usually mean they’ve come to a realization, an understanding that had eluded them before that moment.

Something clicked in their minds and they were able to see something in a new light. Perhaps they were able to see a relationship between two different events in their life. A simple example would be the first time you learned to tie your shoes – taking the two ends of the shoelace and learning to tie them together – and “Aha!” your shoelaces are tied.

Or maybe you had an epiphany that was something more conceptual – like reading the title of an abstract painting and relating that to what the artist was expressing on the canvas. Really seeing what the artist was saying.

An “epiphany” moment is usually something that takes us into a new relationship with the world around us, new way of seeing or moving in the world. In sacred terms it’s a new way of seeing Christ or seeing how he is working in our lives.

Matthew’s gospel brings us the story of the Magi and their epiphany – they saw the baby Jesus as the Messiah.

Mark’s gospel points to a different event in Jesus’ life where this epiphany (the manifestation of Jesus as the Christ, the anointed one) takes place.

For Mark, the moment is not at Jesus’ birth, but when Jesus is coming up out of the water after being baptized by John. Jesus sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. “And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

For gospel writer Mark, this is the moment when Jesus’ divinity is solidified.

You see, for gospel writers Matthew and Luke that moment happened when the Angel Gabriel announced to Mary she was chosen to be Jesus’ mother.

But for Mark, it’s a different event – Jesus’ baptism by John.

What I want you to understand is what Mark is doing here, he’s setting the stage for telling the life story of Jesus in a way that is different from how people wrote or told biographies back then.

Mark deviates from the tradition by bringing the genre of biography to it another level. Mark’s gospel does more that account for the events in the life of Jesus. Through his gospel he tells us who God is.

In Mark’s gospel Jesus speaks not only to the characters in the story but to us, the readers and future disciples. To do this Mark uses a narrative device that biblical scholars call “the messianic secret”. Where the divinity of Jesus is revealed as a secret to the characters in the story. As we’ll see throughout this year, Jesus will do something (a miracle or a teaching) and say something along the lines of “do not tell anyone”.

This not only creates tension in the story, it brings the reader in – we know how the story ends, but the characters don’t know – so we too are “in on” the secret.

And throughout Mark’s gospel we’ll read stories of how the disciples and others came to realize Jesus’ divinity – we’ll read about their epiphanies about not only who Jesus is, but also who God is and how God chooses to disclose who he is to the faithful.

This is the beauty of Mark’s gospel.

Every time we read and reflect upon a passage, a “secret mystery”, we have the opportunity to receive a new epiphany.

For me, it came when I thought about how Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. I read it and thought, that sounds right. But as I read commentary on the passage by one scholar I learned that it also meant Jesus too was among the many people on the shoreline waiting to be baptized. Jesus experienced the joy of new life with God through baptism just as we do.

And after John baptizes him with water, the Holy Spirit (portrayed as a dove) descends upon Jesus. This is the moment Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit.

This blew me away. Jesus received the Holy Spirit through baptism, just as we do.

By doing this, Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of John the Baptist who said he baptized with water for the forgiveness of sins, but Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. It was a remarkable convergence of the Holy Trinity in one event.

Then God says, in a voice only Jesus hears, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

A voice only meant for Jesus and of course you and I (the readers), this is the first of Mark’s “messianic secrets”.

This is the epiphany Mark shares with us. The realization that Jesus was not only the Messiah; He was also one of us.

This is the nature of Christ that Mark wants us to know. One who lived among us, who was one of us, and who was also divine. And as we travel in Mark’s world this year we’ll learn more about the nature of God.

I hope you experience and reflect upon many epiphanies about Christ this year, and the nature of God. Most of all, I hope you remember to let those you love in on the “secret” too.

Amen.