

A Baptism of our Lord 1.8.23
Matthew 3:13-17
Focus Statement: God works with us.

There is a poem by Walter Brueggemann about Epiphany that I love. I love it so much that most years, this year included, I stick it in the Take Home House Blessing sheet. What I love about the poem is that it recognizes the tension in Epiphany, that this is a season where we talk about the light of Christ being in the world, but it's January and, for us at least, it's Michigan, and it's really dark, like, most of the time. We sing songs about the Light of Christ coming into the world and Christ Be Our Light, and all these other light songs, all the while the sun is only up for a few hours every day, and it's too cold to be outside anyway. And that's not to get to the darkness of the world. Last week, Laurie offered a prayer for the people of Ukraine, and I made a bit of a dark joke about how there are so many places in conflict that it's hard to remember which place we should be praying for today. We're coming out-ish of a pandemic, and I leave the ish on there, because while Covid itself is better, it uncovered a lot of other problems that we're now left putting the pieces together on. We're tired. You're tired, I'm tired, the building feels tired. What is the season of Epiphany but more empty talk?

This is where our hero of Advent, your friend and mine, John the Baptist comes in. But before we get to John, let's start with a little bit of liturgical background setting. The first Sunday of Epiphany always starts with the baptism of Jesus. This is fitting because Jesus' baptism is one of the few stories that appears in all four Gospels. And not only does it appear in all four Gospels, Jesus' baptism is also the first appearance of the adult Jesus in all four Gospels. It is the event that marks the start of his public ministry, Jesus' formal

introduction on the world's stage. At Jesus' baptism, we get all of the pomp and circumstance telling us who Jesus is, the heavens opening, the Spirit of the Lord descending, and a voice from heaven declaring Jesus, God's "Son, the Beloved, with whom [God is] well pleased."

And ushering in this declaration of God's beloved Son is John. We first met John back in Advent, when we read the start of chapter three and heard about how "John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is," we are told, "the one about whom the prophet Isaiah spoke."

And here's the thing about John the Baptist, and about Isaiah, and about so many other times and places and people in scripture, including those who had gathered at the river Jordan to be baptized by John, confessing their sins. Remember how I started this sermon talking about how it's dark right now. It's practically dark, it's January, but also it's emotionally dark. It's a dark, heavy time with pandemic-ish and with war and weather and so much heft. It was dark for the people of John too. They came flocking to be baptized by John in the Jordan for the same reason I'm guessing a lot of us come here, for the same reason I come here, because I want to see the light of God in the world. I want to believe that the words the prophet Isaiah wrote about in our reading today, that God's servant, God's chosen, is coming and is here. That this servant will not grow faint or be crushed but will bring justice and peace and salvation. I come here because I want to see that, I want to believe that, I want to know that.

John talked with confidence about the one for whom he was preparing the way, but I wonder if he was also waiting in just as much anticipation as his followers were for this one to come. I wonder if he too, though he didn't come out and say it, had hopes that Jesus the Messiah was going to come sweeping in on some giant warhorse, chase out all the Romans, turn over the tables, and generally establish God's kingdom on earth immediately. John knew he was the messenger, yes, but I think he kind of expected the one about whom he was delivering the message to be a little bit flashier.

Guys, I think John was tired. John had been in the wilderness for a while by this point. He'd amassed followers, he's baptized many, he had Pharisees and Sadducees coming and causing trouble, and he just kept hoping for the one for whom he had been preparing the way to get there and take over the workload, so he would know it had all been for something. I think John was tired and that's why when Jesus came to the Jordan and was all, now you baptize me, John was like, no. No, this is all wrong. You've got this all wrong. You're supposed to be the one saving me, not the other way round. I think it caused John to question, like we heard him also do in a different advent reading from a few weeks ago, "are you the one who is to come? Or are we to wait for another?"

But Jesus persisted, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." And let's talk briefly about righteousness, what it is and what it means. We first heard about righteousness on the last Sunday of Advent, when Joseph was described as a "righteous man" and for this reason he was unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace when he found out she was pregnant. And I think I said back then, not being willing to

expose Mary to public disgrace would have been seen by some as a sign of Joseph's unrighteousness. Righteousness, as it was commonly practiced, as it is still today often commonly practiced, was seen as strict obedience to the culturally accepted understanding of the Law of God. The law says unmarried pregnant women are to be shunned, no matter that the unmarried pregnant woman in question is pregnant with the literal son of God, the bible says it, I believe it, away with her! And what we'll see throughout Matthew's Gospel is this redefinition of what it means to be righteous. Righteousness in Matthew's Gospel is not an undoing of what was written in the law or the prophets, far from it. Remember, John the Baptist, the one about whom the prophet Isaiah spoke, Matthew's a big fan of the prophets. But righteousness in Matthew's Gospel is about learning to read the law and the prophets in a different light, the light of Christ, so that God's law brings life and hope and salvation to ALL of God's people. That, dear people of God, is what is meant by righteousness.

And fulfilling all righteousness? That's just doing the thing. That's just being a part of the work that God has in store for creation.

Dear people of God, here's the two words from this passage that cracked the whole Gospel narrative wide open for me this week. Let me read verse fifteen again, "But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so, for it is proper *for us* in this way to fulfill all righteousness.'" Did you catch that? For us? The fulfillment of righteousness wasn't something Jesus was doing by himself, it was something he was inviting John to come alongside him and do with him.

Jesus was inviting John into the work of God's salvation history, even more than he already

was, making John a partner in Jesus' own ministry, a co-creator in the building of God's kingdom. Jesus makes John a partner because that's what the incarnation is at its heart about. It is about a God who slipped into skin to be with us, to walk alongside us in the good, the bad, the hard and the beautiful. It's about salvation yes, but don't we proclaim that God is God. If the incarnation was really about how humanity did something really really bad and so God had to come save us from ourselves, don't you think God could have done that from the safety of heaven? The incarnation is about a God who loves us so much that God wants to walk around with us, next to us, be partners with us in the work of the kingdom, bring us in as God's own apprentices in creation to teach us the wonder and the beauty and the majesty of God.

Dear people of God, this Epiphany season I invite you, I challenge you, to look not for where God is coming to save, but where God is already at work. Look at brave Ukrainian grandmothers and healthcare workers who are holding strong. Look for overworked shelter staff on our southern border. Look at school librarians and teachers slipping a new pair of gloves into a poor child's backpack and paraprofessionals doubling at trauma-informed care providers. Look at our Advent bags and the boxes of tissue that came in when I said Post Franklin Elementary needed tissue and the multitude of other ways you care for each other every day. Dear people of God, the light of Christ has come into the world. May we have eyes to how God is at work in us and in so many others, to fulfill all righteousness. Thanks be to God. Amen.