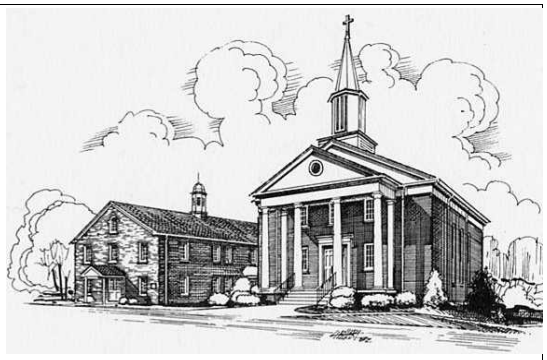
First Sunday after the Epiphany



The Baptism of our Lord

Year C

RCL

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
Psalm 29
Acts 8:14-17

The Collect

Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

Psalm 29

Afferte Domino

1 Ascribe to the LORD, you gods, *
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
2 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his Name; *
worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.
3 The voice of the LORD is upon the waters;
the God of glory thunders; *
the LORD is upon the mighty waters.
4 The voice of the LORD is a powerful voice; *
the voice of the LORD is a voice of splendor.
5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedar trees; *
the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon;
6 He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, *
and Mount Hermon like a young wild ox.
7 The voice of the LORD splits the flames of fire;
the voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; *
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
8 The voice of the LORD makes the oak trees writhe *
and strips the forests bare.

9 And in the temple of the LORD *
all are crying, "Glory!"

10 The LORD sits enthroned above the flood; *
the LORD sits enthroned as King for evermore.

11 The LORD shall give strength to his people; *
the LORD shall give his people the blessing of peace.

The First Lesson

Acts 8:14-17

When the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

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 heav-

en, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

SERMON

On Epiphany Sunday the church celebrates the manifestation of Christ to the gentiles in the persons of the Magi. On the first Sunday after the Epiphany, the church speaks eloquently of the gift of the Holy Spirit, something not much discussed in contemporary circles. That's something we need to remedy, because apart from the Spirit’s coming, the narrative must come to a stand-still, since the witness of the apostles is contingent upon it. Today, I want to explore what that phrase, “gift of the Holy Spirit” means.

It is one thing to confess that we live within the creation of the Lord. It is another thing entirely to confront the consequences of such a confession, but until we do, accepting that we live within God's creation is no more life-changing than confessing that we live in North America. There's no personal impact to such a confes-

sion. Without a personal epiphany, a sudden, intuitive perception of, and insight into, the reality of God's living presence within each of us our confession is impotent. To show us how important such a personal epiphany is, Luke picks Samaria as his example, so where's Samaria? Josephus wrote:

> **Now as to the country of Samaria, it lies between Judea and Galilee...and is entirely of the same nature with Judea; for both countries are made up of hills and valleys, and are moist enough for agriculture, and are very fruitful. They have abundance of trees, and are full of autumnal fruit, both that which grows wild, and that which is the effect of cultivation.**

Pleasant sounding place, but the relationship between Judea and Samaria was not good. That is why Jesus chose a "good Samaritan" as an unlikely person to do a good deed in the parable of the same name. Relations

remain poor to this day. Samaria is what we call the "West Bank" – not quite Gentiles, not quite Jews as Jews of the time understood the term, but Luke tells us:

> When the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them.

Luke's words don't transmit any emotion over this revelation at all. Something unheard of has happened and even the Samaritans have "accepted" that it has happened. Acceptance without working a change in life is meaningless. Peter and John are dispatched to help with the completion of the revelation. It has to be made more than an intellectual acceptance of historical truth. What is needed is a personal epiphany. What does such a thing look like?

When I was a very young boy, my mother warned me sternly never to touch electric outlets because they

could hurt you. I accepted her advice. One day, however, I found a pair of eyebrow tweezers. The space between the two arms of the tweezers was exactly the same as the distance between the two slots in the electric outlet. What a co-incidence! I accepted what my mother had told me, but I didn't connect emotionally and fully with it. I soon learned that the distance between the two prongs of eyebrow tweezers are exactly the distance between acceptance and epiphany!

I mentioned earlier that talk of the Holy Spirit is out of fashion in today's world. We tend to associate it with emotional displays that we are sometimes not comfortable with, but I'd like to suggest that mere acceptance of a proposition is impotent without the sudden realization that our lives are subject to an influence for good which we cannot see in the way we see a traffic light, and so fail to recognize. As unlikely a person as Fred-

erich Nietzsche once wrote:

> **“If I wished to shake this tree with my hands, I should not be able to do so. But the wind, which we see not, troubleth and bendeth it as it listeth. We are sorest bent and troubled by invisible hands.”**[1]

He’s right about that. We are in the hands of forces invisible to us. It is when those forces manifest themselves to our consciousness and we receive them with gratitude, that the work gets done.

Here is where I revert to my childhood and get super geeky. Bear with me. I think you’ll like it. We live on the earth, which orbits the sun, right? It does so because of the sun’s enormous gravity. Still with me? The sun’s gravity keeps an entire system of planets and other objects spinning with such precision that you and I are never aware we are held in its grasp. We have no way of sensing it, yet it whirls us in our orbit at 67,000 mph!

1 “Also Sprach Zarathustra”, Fredrich Nietzsche

Impressed? I've got an even more powerful example. Our sun and its enormous gravitational field lives in a galaxy called the Milky Way which is made up of 250 BILLION stars. It is so large that if you were on its outer edge and turned on a laser, it would take 53,000 years for that beam of light to reach a detector on the other side! Smack in the center is an object we call Sagittarius A*. Sagittarius A* is a super massive black hole, a thing so horrible and powerful that not even light can escape from it. The presence of Sagittarius A* is the reason the Milky Way exists. You, the earth the sun and the entire solar system, along with the other 250 billion stars, are, at this very instant, moving in orbit around Sagittarius A* at a rate of 500,000 miles per hour. I'm guessing that until now, you didn't know you were in the power of such a thing. I know that, like Samaria, you accept what I'm telling you, but since no

one dived screaming to the floor to hold on to the pew in front, I’m convinced there has been no personal epiphany. You are still not feeling the power that is moving you. Even though neither you, nor I, nor this planet could be here without Sagittarius A* or something exactly like it, even though we owe our existence to it, we can't see it, even through a telescope. We can only “see” it as a radio source.

I've given you all this geeky stuff because I want you to have a sense of what a tiny blip on the surface of reality you really are. Only by starting there can you emotionally connect with the news that God, the creator of everything, INCLUDING Sagittarius A*, loves you. Not approves of you. Not notices you favorably. God loves you, even though you didn’t, and couldn’t, earn such love.

When the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

You can cuddle your grandchildren in your lap. You can hold the hand of your husband or wife to help them over a curb, and be glad that you were there to do so. You can sit contentedly on the couch with your life's partner and watch TV. You can involve yourself in all manner of human love and be nurtured by it, but until you have come to see yourself as not even a grain of sand in an infinite desert and at the same time hold the certainty that the God who spoke all into existence loves you, not in a general sense, not one of many, but you individually, not until then can you come into prop-

er relationship with God. That epiphany is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus:

> The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

You are the saints Paul spoke of, and yours is the ministry for which the church exists to equip you. You cannot come to the unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God by accepting a proposition, only by personal epiphany.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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