

Yr. C, Epiphany 1
January 7, 2007
Preached by Furman Buchanan
St. Martins in the Fields (renewal of baptism)
1624 words

Lessons:
Psalm 89:1-29
Isaiah 42:1-9
Acts 10:34-38
Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

I speak to you in the name of one who baptizes us with holy wind and fire, Jesus Christ our savior.

I found Christ this week in the character of a cynical alcoholic who managed to wind up in prison. Many people said of him that he was a hopeless drunk. But this week, he showed me in fresh new ways what it means to baptize with holy wind and fire.

I wish the Church knew more about how to baptize with holy wind and fire. We may not have a long line of baptismal candidates—kind of like today—but when people have been immersed in the Holy Wind and Fire, they are transformed! Or as a friend once remarked about someone who was an especially faithful person, “Looks like the baptism stuck!”

The gift of this season of Epiphany is that we have time to pay special attention to the ways in which Jesus of Nazareth manifested the life of God so clearly that it was visible to the blind, audible to the deaf, and immediately perceptible to the most sick and pathetic people wandering around ancient Palestine. Just like John said in today’s Gospel lesson: One who is more powerful will baptize with holy wind and fire.

Epiphany can also be a time when we can discover the ways in which the Christ of God has been manifest *since* the earthly ministry of Jesus through the lives of saints and through the lives of sinners, just like the wretched drunk who made Christ manifest for me this week. Like John said in today’s Gospel lesson: One who is more powerful will baptize with holy wind and fire.

I’ve nearly come the conclusion that if the Church is to survive in the current ocean of thoughtless and spiritless paganism that surrounds us, we better start looking more carefully at how the ancient Church operated—after all, they not only survived in that environment, they *thrived* in it.

The ancient Church celebrated three primary commemorations: Epiphany, Pascha (or Easter) and Pentecost. That’s right, the Christmas machine was not plugged in until the 4th century. And the Feast of Epiphany—that was yesterday, January 6th—was the first blockbuster in the trilogy of how Christians of the 3rd century marked time.

The themes in Epiphany are related—the baptism of our Lord (which we commemorate today), the visit of the Magi, Jesus’ first miracle, and the Transfiguration—all pointing to the common theme of how Jesus Christ *fully* and *perfectly* manifested God to humans—right there and then, right here and now.

The Eastern Church refers to January 6th as “The Theophany,” i.e. “the God-display.” Christmas may be the season of the incarnation, but Epiphany is the season that elaborates on the whole purpose of the incarnation. Only half of our Gospels even reference the precious Christ child, but all four point—over and over again—to the various ways in which he manifests God’s life in our world and God’s light in our world.

We begin this season of Epiphany with Jesus' baptism, *and with our baptism*. We make such a fuss about Christmas, much of it fueled by impossible, nostalgic expectations or disappointments from our childhood. Just at the point when we are called to celebrate the Theophany—the God-display—many of us are so consumed by nursing our wounds and calculating our credit card debt from the crush of the holidays that we miss the inauguration of how we have come to know Jesus as the Christ, the one who baptizes with holy wind and fire.

With the help of John, today's Gospel points at the inauguration. This wild man living along the fringe of religious life in Palestine points straight at the one who is more powerful. Such a powerful display could not be contained in the manger, just like it cannot now be contained in a modest baptismal font with a dainty amount of water, politely sprinkled upon infants and unsuspecting congregations wary of the asperges.

The baptism of Jesus is an immersion in water, wind and fire like no other. It is an immersion signaled like no other, by the descent of the Holy Spirit as plainly as if one were watching a dove come down from these very lights. It is an immersion shot through with the loving pleasure of God Almighty, whose voice can be heard to say, "You belong to me, beloved. With you I am well pleased." It is an immersion signaled *even by a hopeless drunk* who gets himself thrown into prison on purpose.

What I am trying to say is that the baptism of our Lord is the same as your and my baptism in our Lord—it is an utterly transformative event that is so real and so powerful and so immediate that your life—and even the lives of those you love—is never the same again.

My epiphany of Christ this week shone through the life of a man named Sidney. He was an English lawyer by trade, and his life was a total wreck. But there is one thing that Sidney understood in spite of his insufferable drunkenness. He understood—even if he never read it in the Bible—that "no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."¹

The man of whom I am speaking is Sidney Carton, the protagonist of Charles Dickens' classic novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*. This week I had the privilege of reading a chapter to my daughter at bedtime. This particular chapter begins when Sidney Carton slips into the prison cell of Charles Darnay, a man who is about one hour away from being killed by the razor-sharp blade of a French guillotine. And Sidney insists that Charles allow him to take his place under that blade.

Charles at first thought he was having a vision, but the reader knows it was a *true epiphany*—a conspicuous display of love as explicit as a dove flying down from these lights. Charles, being honorable, refuses Sidney's kindness, but the reader learns that his savior immerses him—so to speak—in enough vapor so that he passes out and Sidney can do the work of changing clothes with him to complete this feat of salvation.

Charles—now fully immersed in the identity of Sidney—is carried from the prison and becomes a free man. He has been baptized. He has been given a new life. He has been given the gift of unselfish love. He did not deserve it. He could not imagine it. He was even too proud to receive it.

¹ John 15:13

You and I are just like Charles. We are given a Holy Baptism—immersed in God’s life and in God’s love, even in God’s own identity! It is a gift beyond our imagination. It is a new beginning beyond our deserving. It is a new life that overwhelms our pride of being self-made men and women.

Holy Baptism is a sacrament that transforms us by reminding us that we are all living about one hour’s distance from the world’s guillotine. We are in darkness and we are closed in with no escape. Into that darkness breaks forth Christ, manifest in his resplendent and reckless mercy. He has come to set us free.

There you have it—the Season of Epiphany and the Sacrament of Holy Baptism in graphic relief and in three simple truths—Christ with us. Christ for us. Christ in us. Each one of those truths is indispensable for the faithful Christian.

When you’re suffering from the oppression of pain or sickness or any other affliction, you better believe that Christ is with us.

When you’re cruising along in life feeling pretty secure in your own strength and stability, you better not forget that Christ is *for* us. That is to say, you cannot make it in this life (or out of this life) on your own. We need Christ to be there *for* us when the chips are down, the hour is late, and the moment of our reckoning is near at hand.

Finally, when you have something to share with others who are suffering or lonely or hopeless, you better believe that Christ is in us. That is to say, *you* must be the Sidney Carton for others. You must let the Christ in you be manifest here and now by showing reckless mercy for others.

Lest you say that reckless mercy is only found in fiction by novelists like Charles Dickens, I want to draw your attention to the story of Wesley Autrey, the New Yorker who was minding his own business this week with his two young daughters in a New York subway...until he risked his own life for a stranger who had fallen in front of an oncoming train. Wesley Autrey was reckless in his mercy, just like Christ and just like Sidney Carton, offering everything for the sake of love. Dear people of St. Martin’s—that is what it means to be the Church—to be faithful people so immersed in Christ’s identity that we find ourselves overflowing with reckless mercy.

Within the Church right now I see a lot of recklessness that is reactive and hurtful. And then I look at a cynical drunk like Sidney Carton or an ordinary guy in a subway station like Wesley Autrey, and I see a recklessness that is overflowing with Christ’s mercy.

Which do you believe is borne of a more powerful baptism of holy wind and fire? Which do you believe is borne of prayer that will lead our Father in heaven to say once again, “You are my child(ren), my beloved; with whom I am well pleased.”?