

Thankful Memorial, Chattanooga
January 8, 2023
Year A, 1 Epiphany
The Unexpected Power
The Rev. Leyla King

Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 29
Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 3:13-17

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Because we are the kind of parish that gathers only on Sundays, we are apt to miss a major feast day of the Church now and then. Last Sunday, for example, we celebrated together the Feast of the Holy Name of our Lord for the first time in a decade or so because it happened to land on a Sunday. But we missed the Feast Day of the Epiphany which the Church marks on January 6, this past Friday. Epiphany commemorates the moment when the magi from the East, believing that the star they followed would lead them to the king of the Jews, arrived at the place where the infant Jesus was. We will remember that event in a few moments by receiving “Star Words” right before the offertory.

But we don’t hear about the magi in our readings today because on this first Sunday after the Epiphany, the Church always remembers the baptism of the grown-up Jesus in the river Jordan by his cousin John to inaugurate Jesus’ earthly ministry as a teacher, prophet and healer.

Now, at first glance, these two events that we celebrate here at Thankful this morning may not seem all that related to one another. But, in fact, they are. Both the magi’s acknowledgement of the baby Jesus as King and the baptism of the adult Jesus, when the heavens part and the voice and Spirit of God name him as the Father’s Son, are moments of divine epiphany.

The word “epiphany” means “appearing” or “revealing” and these two divine manifestations that we celebrate today kick off an entire season of the Church year when we continue to hear stories of God’s epiphanies to the world, when the wonderful power of God can be seen in the person of Christ Jesus.

The power of God. What does that phrase bring to mind? If I ask you to imagine the omnipotence of the Creator of the universe, who exists outside of time and beyond this world, what do you think of? The ancient psalmists often turned to natural phenomena to begin to articulate the power of God. We see an example of that in Psalm 29 which we read together this morning. God is so powerful, so great, so mighty, so holy, that simply “the voice of the Lord” would break upon us mortals like a mighty thunderstorm. Even the strong cedars of Lebanon could not stand up against such power. Even the mountains would be shaken off their foundations in the onslaught of “the voice of the Lord.” The psalmist’s poetry rightfully portrays the power of God as something to stand in awe of, something so beautiful and mighty and holy that it demands our worship.

Many centuries after the psalmist wrote that poem describing the divine power of the Lord, magi from the East followed a star and showed up at the door of the dwelling where a small child had been born and fell to their knees to pay him homage. Three decades after that, John the Baptist saw his cousin Jesus on the banks of the Jordan and recognized the Messiah he had been waiting for. All the power that the psalmist sang of, all the strength and glory, holiness and beauty that would wash over us like a mighty thunderstorm gets poured out into the body of one child who grows up to be a

dripping wet man standing among so many other run-of-the-mill peasants just baptized in the waters of the Jordan. The way Matthew's gospel tells it, only a few foreigners recognize the voice of the Lord in the crying infant before them; only his cousin guesses that the shaker of mountains stands before him. If you're not paying attention, you'd miss it. All that glory and splendor, all that divine power to worship "in the beauty of holiness" is present in this mewling infant, in this unassuming Galilean man. Can you see it?

That is the question, the invitation, the challenge of Epiphany: what do we see? What do we imagine when we bring to mind the power of God? What are we looking for when seek the Lord? Where are we expecting divine epiphanies? Do we look only for the miraculous and the marvelous? Are we waiting for some flash of lightning or some angel dressed in glowing white to show us the way to encounter our God? Because if that's what we're looking for, no wonder we so often draw a blank.

But the gospel stories tell us to look for all the power and strength of God in the humblest of places, the simple signs of love, the regular people around us. These first stories of the season of Epiphany ask us to reimagine how we expect to encounter the beautiful holiness of God in our lives.

As writer Debie Thomas puts it, "During this [...] liturgical season between Christmas and Lent, we're invited to leave miraculous births and angel choirs behind, and seek the love, majesty and power of God in seemingly mundane things. [...] In the Gospel stories we read during this season, God parts the curtain for brief, shimmering moments, allowing us to look beneath and beyond the ordinary surfaces of our lives, and catch glimpses of the extraordinary."

Hear those words again: in the coming weeks, when we gather together Sunday after Sunday, we will "look beneath and beyond the ordinary surfaces of our lives, and catch glimpses of the extraordinary." But the gospel stories aren't just descriptions of the ways in which God's divinity broke into our humanity two thousand years ago. They also stand as a reminder that God's work in Christ Jesus is still ongoing, and we are invited to continue to look for the manifestation of the power of God in our world today.

In a few moments, we will pass around baskets with Star Word gifts for each member of the congregation. You are invited to reach into the basket and – without looking, without choosing – help yourself to a star. If you know someone who isn't here today who would like such a gift, bring them to your mind and heart and choose a star for them, too.

It might seem like a simple thing, even a silly thing, to imagine that a word written on a piece of cardstock would make any difference in our life. But the season of Epiphany teaches us that nothing, no thing, is too small or too simple for God.

So, look with the eyes of faith at your star and consider the word written on it as an opportunity to find the Lord in your present reality. I invite you to use your word throughout the year ahead as a reminder that God's presence and power break into our every day – through any moment of any day – to surprise us with God's glory and majesty. If we will let it, perhaps a simple word on a cut-out of cardstock will lead us on a journey of discovery, on a series of epiphanies, one after the other, when "beneath and beyond the ordinary surfaces of our lives," we can "catch glimpses of [God's] extraordinary." Happy Epiphany! Amen.