



*Rooted in Belovedness: Jesus' Baptism, and Ours*

January 9, 2022: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the First Sunday after the Epiphany

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment

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*Oh Lord: Take our minds and think through them; take our mouths and speak through them; take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.*

I direct your attention this morning to two important symbols at the front of our worship space, right next to the pulpit. The first is the manger scene; the second is the Paschal candle.

The manger tableau is an important part of our Christmas narrative. It is a central image of the Christmas pageant, of Christmas carols, of the Feast of the Nativity of Jesus—to use fancy church talk for the occasion of birth of Jesus.

But the manger is also an important symbol marking the Feast of the Epiphany. In many cultures, the Feast of the Epiphany outshines Christmas not only as a religious festival, but as a festive cultural and civic holiday as well. Epiphany was in fact an established Christian feast by the late in 2<sup>nd</sup> century, earlier in our history than Christmas. It is celebrated on January 6<sup>th</sup>. *[Fact correction after the sermon was delivered: Epiphany preceded Christmas as an important feast in the Eastern Church. In the Western Church centered in Rome, the first mention of Epiphany as a feast is 361; the first mention of Christmas as fixed feast is in 379.*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphany\\_\(holiday\)#History](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphany_(holiday)#History)

The Epiphany marks the arrival of the Magi, often translated inaccurately into English as *kings*, at the manger. These figures are only found in Matthew's Gospel, where the Greek word is *μαγος*, (*magos*) a word of Persian derivation. It's where we get the English word "magic." They have followed the star to the Holy Child. Though our beloved story in Matthew suggests that the Magi were present shortly after Jesus' birth, it's more likely that arrived sometime later. Tradition also says

there were three of *them*—though the text only says that they brought three *gifts*: frankincense, gold and myrrh, gifts fit for royalty. Scholars tell us that they were religious leaders, wise in the ways of astrology, which was honored as a science in those times. They may have been practitioners of Zoroastrianism, a religion whose sources were in Persia.

The arrival of the Magi marks the manifestation of the message of Jesus to the whole world, not just to the shepherds and peasants of Judea. Epiphany literally means "manifestation." Our tradition says that as they left the Christ Child, they took the message of light and love with them back to the East. The light of the star that guided them there, becomes into the light of Christ, which is meant for all peoples.

Which brings us to the Paschal Candle. The Paschal Candle is the ancient symbol for the light of Christ. *Paschal* comes from the Latin word *pascha*, which comes from the Hebrew word *pesach*, which in Hebrew means 'Passover'. From the beginning, Easter has been intertwined with Passover, since Jesus' death and resurrection took place in the context of the Passover holy days.



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And since the earliest times, the Paschal candle has been connected with Baptism. We light it at Easter, and it burns through the Easter season for 50 days until Pentecost, reminding us of Christ's victory over darkness, death, and despair. We light it whenever we celebrate a baptism. These last two years, when we have practiced seven-week Expanded Advent, the Paschal Candle becomes for the brief Christmas season the Christ Candle in the Advent wreath, marking the arrival of Jesus.

The Paschal Candle is lit today because today in the Church year we mark the Baptism of Jesus. You'll remember that last week, Jesus was years old. This week, Jesus emerges from the silent years to begin his public ministry, roughly at the age of thirty.

The Baptism of Jesus is a bit complicated for the Gospel writers. They are uncomfortable with Jesus taking part in a ritual described as a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." (Matt. 3.6,11; Mark 1.4; Luke 3.3) For what did the Son of God need to be forgiven? Didn't having *John* baptize *Jesus* make *Jesus* somehow *subordinate* to John? None of that seems to bother Jesus. And John is clear about his own secondary standing. Both exhibit a refreshing humility and lack of ego that is a mark of the Holy Spirit, which all of us do well to imitate.

And this humility comes from knowing who, and whose, they are, and who they serve. One author describes Jesus' baptism, not as a sign of repentance, but as a public, ritual, re-rooting his identity in God. God says to Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved. In you, I am well pleased." And that is what God says to each and every one of us: "You are my Beloved. In you, I am well pleased."

<https://www.holytextures.com/2009/12/luke-3-15-17-21-22-year-c-epiphany-1-january-7-january-13-baptism-sermon.html>

In our baptisms, we are blessed to follow in Jesus' footsteps, in the public, ritual re-rooting of *our* identities. As we reaffirm our Baptismal Covenant today, we are recalling God's word to *each and every one* of us: "*You are my Beloved. In you, I am well pleased.*"

That love is the light we bring to the world, enabled and empowered by our Baptisms. The promises we reaffirm charge us with bearing the light of Christ, so that we testify to the light of the world, by reflecting and being that light. That light lives in each one of us, and in everyone we meet. Each and every human being is a precious child of God. Like the Magi, we go back into the world with the gift of the encounter with Jesus in our baptism. We take the light from that manger out into the world.

It may not seem like much sometimes. The darkness and despair may seem overwhelming. But as Presiding Bishop Curry said in his address this past Thursday, January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany, the same day as the first anniversary of the violence at the Capital, "Epiphany declares that the Light *was not, cannot, and will not* be overcome." <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2022/01/06/in-epiphany-service-and-lincoln-memorial-speech-presiding-bishop-calls-nation-to-wake-from-the-nightmare-of-jan-6/>



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It may even be possible that the very structure of the universe itself ensures that darkness and despair do not, and will not, *ever* have the final word. The New York Times reports “that four billion miles from the sun, far from bright planets and the light scattered by interplanetary dust, empty space is about twice as bright as would be expected. One physicist compared this measurement to the amount of light supplied by an open refrigerator a mile away. ‘...think of lying in bed with the curtains open on a dark moonless night...Perhaps you’re awake and are staring at the walls. When .... your neighbor raids his fridge, we would see the light in the room get a little brighter.’ However, he noted, ‘Your distant neighbor eating leftover turkey at three in the morning is not going to wake you up at night from the glare.’ ”

And yet nonetheless... another scientist wrote that he and his brainstorming colleagues “ ‘...had not come up with any new physics that would explain this added light...’ ”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/08/science/astronomy-cosmos-blackness.html?searchResultPosition=4>

The light *cannot* be overcome by the darkness.

Empowered by the belovedness in our baptisms, may we take the light and love of the light of Christ, out into the world.

Amen.