

Isaiah 42: 1-9
Matthew 3: 13-17
January 9, 2011
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Epiphany Sunday

This past Thursday while we were wondering about how much snow was going to fall upon us a subtle but important shift took place in the spiritual landscape. The season of Christmas came to an end and the season of Epiphany began.

The season of Christmas focuses on the birth of Jesus—what theologians call the Incarnation: that wonderful and mysterious event when, in the poetry of the Gospel of John, “The Word became flesh.” It is the celebration of God becoming human and therefore sharing God’s divine life with our mortal lives.

Yet the birth of Jesus does not stand alone. To be simplistic and crude, God did not become human in Jesus to create a crèche scene or a Christmas card. The birth of Jesus was and is a life and history altering intervention of the Divine into daily human life. In other words, the significance of the incarnation depends on what happens *as a result of the birth*. Phillips Brooks expressive this truth beautifully in the carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem”

O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to *us* we pray.
Cast out *our sin* and enter in. Be born *in us* today.

The power of the birth of Jesus lies in God’s intention that the divine presence which infused the life of Jesus *be born in each human being and in humanity as a whole*. Epiphany recognizes this profoundly hopeful and life transforming purpose of Jesus birth. It was not, nor is it now, enough to observe and venerate Jesus in the manger. We are meant to open our hearts to the same divine presence that was and is in him.

In a symbolic way we recognize this intention in the candle lighting ceremony on Christmas Eve. We take the light of the flame of the Christ Candle and then pass that light one to another so that the light of Jesus Christ fills the sanctuary. And even the way we pass the light is important. In order to prevent the wax dripping, we dip our candles to the flame. In other words, the best way to receive the light of Christ is to bow to receive the light.

It is in this way that the light spreads. Epiphany renders the Greek word meaning “revealing” or “manifestation.” And this the subtle shift that occurred on Thursday represents the movement from the Divine becoming human to that same divinity moving out and becoming a part of the life of the world.

I propose to you that there is no clearer image for this profound transition than when Jesus comes to John to be baptized. For centuries theologians have puzzled over the question of why Jesus needed to be baptized. After all, being the full expression of God in human form he was sinless. What need did Jesus have for John’s baptism which called upon people to feel sorrow for their sins and to repent, that is to set out on a new path of life? Clearly John is confused by the approach of the one he proclaims as messiah. “I need to be baptized by you; and here you are coming to be baptized by me?”

It is a truly puzzling moment! Jesus’ response to John does not clarify matters: “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” In other words, “John, just trust me on this. It’s part of a bigger plan.”

I suggest that “the bigger plan” is this spiritual connection between God and humanity in and through Jesus that takes place when Jesus submits to John’s baptism. God’s life begins to journey forth into the lives of human beings in a surprising and even

jarring act of humility. The Son of God lays aside his divine identity and accepts the identity of humanity *in need of the grace of God*. In this unimaginable release of all claim he might have to a special place among human beings, Jesus literally becomes one of us with all the same needs and desires with which we struggle every day. In submitting to John's baptism, Jesus abandons all special privileges that he might expect as God's son in order that we might approach him as one of us.

Friends this is much more than a photo op. This is not a public display for us to be wowed by Jesus. I propose to you that it is this submission to John's baptism that completes the entry of the Divine presence into our human realm. If Jesus does *not accept* the baptism of repentance of the forgiveness of sins then Jesus will always stand apart from human experience. He will walk the earth. He will teach, preach and heal. He will die on the cross and rise from the dead. But if Jesus does not accept the identity of a sinner he will never be one of us. The connection between God's life and our lives will not happen. We will revere Jesus; but we will never let him close. As it is we have a hard enough time letting Jesus near. Like the child with a broken arm, we shy away from the healing hand of the doctor.

But because Jesus has completed the journey, not just physically by being born in a human being, but spiritually by taking on our sinful nature he is one of us in the most intimate sense. There is not a single aspect of our lives that he cannot identify.

With this difference: As he links his life to ours he can draw us to life he brings from God. We now can bow our heads in faith and trust and receive his life. We can tip our cold and flameless wicks and receive his light. And this light we share with the world. Amen.

