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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
1/8/2011, The Epiphany and Baptism of Our Lord
Matthew 2:1-12, Mark 1:4-11
Seeing That We Might Live

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

JESUS WAS NOT A PRIVATE PERSON

Some people love solitude and privacy. They do not long for the public eye, but rather to be left in peace. Even if they live good and virtuous lives, they are not eager for their lives to be on display. If they must be out and about in town, they walk with humility among others. They do not continually seek to catch the eye of strangers. Indeed, if you do not work at it, you probably will not even notice them, because they do not want to be noticed. They would prefer for other folks to think about other things and not about them.

But it was not the destiny of Jesus to be such a one.

We have lovely and moving Gospel stories for this Sunday -- the stories of the Epiphany and the Baptism of our Lord Jesus. These stories launch Jesus into the public eye. It is not the lot of Jesus to be a private person. He is not to be one of Garrison Keillor's shy Norwegian bachelor farmers. Instead, Jesus is to be seen by others. His life is to be on display for the world -- both for Jews and for Gentiles. So, I have two opening texts -- two passages that bring forth Jesus and set him before our eyes. First, we have the Epiphany story, when the wise men at last get to lay their eyes on baby Jesus:

¹¹And when [the wise men] were come into the house, they *saw* the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him... (Matthew 2:11, KJV)

These wise men had traveled a long ways. Who knows the weariness they might have known along their way, the chill from rains or snow, the thirst or hunger if they were long between towns, and the dangers from robbers or wild animals? But at last they reach that Holy Child you and I will reach someday too. They saw him with their own eyes, and though they were Gentile foreigners to Israel's faith, still it was with them as Jesus himself would say one day:

...him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. (John 6:37, KJV)

A precious saying indeed! Strangers we might be to Jesus so far. Sinners we might be, all too much. Tried and failed, we might have done many a time. Yet if we come to him, he will in no wise cast us out.

My second text simply speaks of the vast congregations that came to John the Baptist:

⁵And there went out to him *all* the country of Judea, and *all* the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. (Mark 1:5, RSV)

John the Baptist was a public figure. He did his baptisms openly. Crowds came to see him, drawn from the cities and towns by his evident piety, his ascetic manner of life, and his fiery preaching. And among the multitudes was our Lord Jesus. Stepping down into the muddy Jordan River to be baptized by John was the Child of Bethlehem, now a grown man. His baptism was not a quiet, private event off in the chapel of a monastery. No, all the folks gathered there at the Jordan were able to witness the baptism of Jesus, and through the testimony of the evangelists, all the world gets to know things about Jesus, including his baptism by John.

The life of Jesus was not a light hidden under a bushel¹. Indeed, toward the end of his life, when the cross was drawing near and he was being interrogated by those who sought his death, Jesus testified that his life and his ministry had been an open book:

¹⁹The high priest then asked Jesus of his disciples, and of his doctrine.

²⁰Jesus answered him, I spake openly to the world; I ever taught in the synagogue, and in the temple, whither the Jews always resort; and in secret have I said nothing. (John 18:19-20, KJV)

My theme in this sermon is that there is a connection between the public nature of the life of our Lord Jesus and our own piety in this, our day and age. In particular, I want to use the simple idea that the life of Jesus was a public life to help illuminate the special kind of baptism with which Jesus baptizes. John the Baptist says that Jesus baptizes “with the Holy Spirit.” John himself - holy man that he is - is not able to do that. But Jesus does. And you and I have been baptized in *that* way, with the Holy Spirit. What does this mean for us? When we get up in the morning, wipe the sleep from our eyes, and set out on the day before us, what does it mean that we have been baptized with the Holy Spirit? I want to suggest that this kind of baptism means that what we have *seen* in Jesus Christ we should let take shape in ourselves! The life of Jesus was not private or hidden away. It was open. We have seen things in him, and it is time for us to make them our own. That is my theme in this sermon.

¹ Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. (Matthew 5:15, KJV)

PREACHING ABOUT THE HOLY SPIRIT

So, what I am aiming to do in this sermon is to try my hand at a subject other preachers are better at than I am. I am thinking of Baptist or Pentecostalist preachers. Those preachers know how to preach about the Baptism of the Holy Spirit! Aye, and such preachers are not an obscure part of Christ's Church on earth. Indeed, we live in a golden age for the Church if we consider things in a worldwide perspective. I mean, the Christian Church is growing by leaps and bounds worldwide, especially in Africa and Asia, and the preachers of the Holy Spirit have much to do with this. So, I pray that the Lord will be with me as I try my hand too at this important subject: Baptism with the Holy Spirit. I will only be making a beginning at this great subject.

Again, though John the Baptist was a holy man, he was not able to do this - to baptize in the Holy Spirit. In our Gospel Lesson about the Baptism of Our Lord, John emphasizes that his own baptism is much inferior to that of the greater One who is to come after him:

⁷And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

John's baptism is an outward sign of the reorientation of the lives of the people. It is a sign of their repentance -- of their turning away from sin in order to ready themselves for the approaching kingdom of God. And that is certainly a good thing, a good thing indeed.

But John says that the baptism of Jesus is a greater thing than that. John testifies that he himself baptizes with water, but that the coming One will "baptize you with the Holy Spirit." What does this mean?

WILLIAM ABRAHAM

To help answer this, let me use a line from one of the commentators on this story -- a Methodist theologian named William Abraham. He says this:

What Christians call salvation can aptly be described as the acquisition of the Holy Spirit... The crowning climax of this process is to be totally immersed in God, to be baptized in the Holy Spirit.²

For this preacher, William Abraham, there is a necessary connection between "salvation" and the "Holy Spirit," such that if one is missing, so is the other. So, if we are walking around this town without the Holy Spirit, I fear that William Abraham would say that we have not yet begun to fight, we have hardly begun to

² William Abraham, *Lectionary Commentary on the Gospels*, page 167.

be saved. John the Baptist testified about Jesus that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Our Christian liturgy of Baptism assumes this is true: when we are baptized, we believe that we are saved and granted the Holy Spirit. So, William Abraham is following through on this with his first point:

What Christians call salvation can aptly be described as the acquisition of the Holy Spirit.

His second point concerns the goal of having the Holy Spirit. What's it all about, this matter of having received the Holy Spirit? Well, William Abraham makes a point that I think the Eastern Orthodox Church and many ancient parts of the Church would agree with. The point of the Holy Spirit is to sanctify us, to make us holy, indeed, to make us more like God himself!

The crowning climax of this process is to be totally immersed in God, to be baptized in the Holy Spirit.

The idea here is that Baptism is meant to overwhelm us and to lift us up into a more divine life. Baptism is meant to blow us away! At least, it is meant to blow away the sin in us. Baptism doesn't reach its goal until we put off the old Adam and Eve and become participants in divinity. That is, Baptism aims that Christ should take up dwelling in us! That is how we become more spiritual. That is how we become more divine. The goal of baptism is that it will be with us as it was with St. Paul, that he could give the good testimony that Christ had overcome him and taken up life within him:

²⁰I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20, RSV)

STUDYING OUR MASTER

This invites us to study our Master. For that is how we become more holy: We look at Christ and try to make what we see our own! We do not ponder Jesus as if he is a mere character of history, but rather we ponder him with the desire that he should take up residence in our hearts and in our lives.

And this in turn brings me back to this morning's theme about the Epiphany and Baptism of Our Lord: Our Lord Jesus lived a public life. His life is not hidden away in a monastery, but is available to be seen, studied, admired, and as best we can, made our own. For this reason, Baptism in the Holy Spirit is not beyond us. The goal of Baptism is that we should become more Christian. Indeed, the goal of Baptism is that we should become "little Christs," which will be a strong blessing indeed for our families and neighbors. And this is not impossible for us, because

we are able to know about Jesus. His record is public. His manner of life is available to be studied and followed.

Let me give you a comparison. Martin Luther once referred to the Lord's Prayer as this world's "greatest martyr." Why? Because we repeat it, but too seldom really enter into it:

What a great pity that the prayer of such a master is prattled and chattered so irreverently all over the world! How many pray the Lord's Prayer several thousand times in the course of a year, and if they were to keep on doing so for a thousand years they would not have tasted nor prayed one iota, one dot,³ of it! In a word, the Lord's Prayer is the greatest martyr on earth (as are the name and word of God). Everybody tortures and abuses it; few take comfort and joy in its proper use.⁴

Luther argues that prayer is necessary for a Christian, not optional, and that we cannot excuse ourselves from prayer on the grounds that we do not know how to pray. We are not uninstructed in prayer, Luther says, because we have the Lord's Prayer. We have the great model on how to pray.

Likewise, the public nature of the life of Jesus means that we are not uninstructed in a holy life, for the great Model is there before us. We cannot plead ignorance of what a divine life in human form would be like because we have the image of such a life right before our eyes.

And so it is that our liturgical calendar has reached the season of Epiphany. "Epiphany" means the "manifestation" or the "showing forth" of our Lord Jesus. We are entering that season of the church year especially devoted to the biography of Jesus. We are going to see what manner of man this is. We are going to see him teach and heal. We are going to see him press on when there is opposition. Altogether, we are going to see the things of a good life, a holy life, a divine life in human form.

And may it be that we see this good life with the goal that we will try to make it our own, becoming more Christ-like, to the blessing of ourselves and our neighbors, in the name of the One who desires to take shape in us, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

³ "Jot and tittle." Matt. 5:18 (KJV).

⁴Luther, M. (1999, c1968). *Vol. 43: Luther's works, vol. 43 : Devotional Writings II* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (43:200). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.