



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

If you attend church regularly, you know that last week we had a beautiful gospel in which the Magi visited the child Jesus, and basically brought these wonderful gifts. And in our hearts we were knitting little baby booties for Jesus. But this week we meet Him as a fully grown man and getting baptized by John in the Jordan River.

And so it seems like we've skipped a lot. And some reason for that is that we don't have a lot of information about Jesus between His birth and the beginning of His public ministry. But there is something else going on and some other reason behind this celebration today of the baptism of Jesus, and that is that we are entering now into the season of Epiphany. And Epiphany celebrates those moments when we see God fully and powerfully in our midst. When we suddenly recognize and the scales fall from our eyes and we see ourselves in God differently than before, when God becomes larger in our lives and we become a bit smaller, but also a bit more fulfilled by being in God.

And that begins, of course, the minute the light that shines from the Bethlehem star begins to shine from the figure of Jesus. And where that begins is in His baptism. And throughout epiphany, we'll be going through the scriptures and picking those passages where light will come from Jesus. We will finish the season epiphany with the transfiguration, that moment when the garments of Jesus and His appearance has changed and light shines up from Him before He goes, in what we read in the Gospel of Luke, through His exodus to Jerusalem, where he will die so that we might live.

So there is something important about today's reading from Matthew about the Epiphany, but also about the baptism of Jesus, because what today's gospel reminds us is that when Jesus comes, there is not just a singular death that He dies and a singular life that He experiences through resurrection, but rather that through Jesus' death, our own death is somehow involved. And through Jesus' resurrection, our own life is somehow involved. And that is communicated to us through the sacrament of baptism. Paul puts this well in his letter to the Romans, we have been baptized into the death of Christ, and that baptism into His death is also a baptism into the resurrection that Jesus brings.

And you and I have an opportunity today to not just give thanks to God in Christ for being baptized and consenting to coming into our human condition and

experiencing death and resurrection for us, but you and I have an opportunity to somehow turn and enter into our own baptism and to be transformed by that rite and that passage, that sacrament once more.

Baptism reminds us that Christianity is not just a religion that welcomes everybody. Christianity is not just a place in which we get to say both/and, but Christianity is at its core an either/or proposition. Either we give ourselves to the Devil, to death, and to sin, or we choose to accept God is Lord and Christ, life and love and liberation. And the core of that is, at the denunciations that we're going to make in a few minutes, and the affirmations we're going to make in a few minutes, all of us are going to be invited to remember that turning away from the power of death, from the power of the devil, from the power of sin, and a turning towards Christ as the source of our life, as our Lord, and as our liberating, love-giving Savior.

All of us have that change because all of us have to deal on a daily basis with the power of death in our midst. And all of us have to deal on a daily basis with a diabolical nature to this world around us. And all of us have to deal on a daily basis with desires that lead us from the love of God. But thanks be to God and Jesus Christ that through baptism, we have the ability to turn and be transformed by the indwelling of the Spirit.

So today is an incredibly important day. It's a day in which you and I can somehow recreate and walk and revisit our baptism and renew the covenants that were made for us when we were children, and the covenants that we lived by in our confirmation, and the covenant that we live by every day. That is what we do today and that is why today is important. And that is why it comes during Epiphany because we will see ourselves in God anew.

And there are three things I want you to hold onto today as you think through this feast of epiphany and this renewal of your baptismal covenant. The first is that epiphany and baptism teaches us that everything begins not in our vows, but in God's vow to love us in Christ. That is to say Jesus has said yes to us. Jesus' yes will always be greater than any no we can say, and that love of Christ shown to us in his baptism is supreme.

My favorite baptism story is of a friend of mine who was a potter in New York City. She had a little shop in Greenwich Village. And she began to attend a church and she fell in love with the Christian faith. She had not been raised in the church. And so right around April she decided to get baptized and went to the classes, was scheduled for the baptism. And then of course, because she's a small business person in New York City, she was also planning that April coming into Easter to cheat on her taxes because how else do you make a buck in New York City?

And so she's cheating on her taxes when suddenly she says to herself, oh my God, I'm going to be baptized. I can't do this. I'm being dishonest. And so she called the rector and said to him, she said, "Look, I'm going to plan better next year. I'll save up a little more money. I won't have to cheat on my taxes. Let's just put this off to next year." And the rector said to her words that have stuck in my heart ever since. He said, "Janet, baptism has nothing to do with what you say about God, it has everything to do with what God says about you." So baptism begins in God. Baptism begins when Jesus says yes to you.

When Jesus descended and took on human form, when He walked this earth through the incarnation and allowed Himself to be baptized so that you might share in His death and resurrection, that is God's yes to you. And what you do when you claim your faith and grow into your faith is you are saying yes back to that first yes. We love, as we read in the 1 John, "We love because he has loved us first."

The second thing I want you to look at is that line in Matthew where we hear from Heaven that God reveals that Jesus is the beloved, because baptism isn't just a conferral of the benefits of the resurrection, but the incredible mystery of baptism is that you and I are knit together in Christ, and it is as if when God looks upon us, He looks at us through the lens of Jesus Christ. Just as Jesus is the beloved of God, so are you the beloved of God. You and I have a share in that title, beloved, because of Christ.

And one of my favorite windows at Christchurch Cranbrook is in the baptistery that we have in the back. And in there you'll see a 10th century stained glass that has the baptism of Jesus with the words "You are my beloved." I invite you after communion to walk back there and claim that status for yourself. No matter what you're facing today, no matter the challenges that you're experiencing, no matter the strains you're under, no matter the loneliness you're experiencing, you are God's beloved in Christ.

The third thing I want you to see is that baptism and repentance and the change and the decision, the either/or decision that we make, this is not something that you do once for all. Rather, your whole life is going to be choosing and turning to God in Christ. And baptism is a reminder to us that to become the people that we were created to be, we have to constantly engage in a kind of reflection on all the things where we have sold ourselves to the power of the Devil, where we have given ourselves over to the power of death, when we have given ourselves over to the power of sin. Each of us has to take some time in epiphany to look at those three different powers in our lives and to let go and to die to them. To turn away from death, to turn away from the devil, to turn away from sin and to claim the lordship of Christ, the life that He offers, and the love that conquers death.

So it's important for us to remember then that this process is a lifelong process of change. Martin Luther said this really well in the 95 Theses, which he

composed and posted in 1517. He said that when our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ said, "Repent," He didn't mean one moment or one season, but He meant that the whole Christian life was to be shaped by repentance. The way we grow as Christians is through repentance. Repentance is, as the scriptures will tell us, a kind of *metanoia*, a changing of our minds and a changing of ourselves so that God can be greater in our lives.

And all of this is epiphany. It's a moment of seeing ourselves and God differently. May we do so on this day in which we realize how much Christ was willing to go through so that we could be together with Him forever.

Amen.