



Texts in Context

“You are my Son, the Beloved”: The Epiphany Gospels

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The Epiphany season is placed awkwardly between the pillars of Christmas and Lent, generally a somewhat down time in pastoral activity. Among early Greek Christians, however, this season focused on Jesus’ baptism as the manifestation of his true person and mission. As a church festival it ranked right up there with Easter and Pentecost.

The Western or Latin church shifted the emphasis of Epiphany to Jesus’ manifestation to the Gentiles, marked by the visit of the foreign magi from the East, those strange astrologers who saw the star (or conjunction of planets) announcing the birth of a king among the Hebrews. Therefore Matt 2:1–12 launches the Epiphany story. This puzzles listeners in the pews, because our image of the wise men has been formed by Sunday School Christmas tableaux, with three boys standing to one side of the manger draped in their parents’ bathrobes and holding aluminum-foil-wrapped boxes as presents for the Bethlehem child. By December 26 we’re done with the wise men, but here they come again, twelve days later, singing “We Three Kings of Orient Are.”

It’s an odd chronology, though probably not a problem for most Protestant churches, since few of us will actually worship on January 6 itself!

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY (THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD):
LUKE 3:15–17, 21–22

The Epiphany theme begins more logically with the baptism of Jesus. This year’s sequence will strike the preacher as odd, however, since the Gospel lessons of

As the season of Epiphany progresses, the appointed Gospel readings make clearer and clearer the meaning of the voice at Jesus’ baptism: “You are my Son, the Beloved.” The preacher’s task is to present this message as fully as possible.

the middle two Sundays of Advent, just a month ago, have already dealt with Luke 3:1–18. But memories are short, and Jesus’ baptism deserves more than a sermon or two anyway.

Now that Jesus has been born, his story continues to unfold with the beginning of his ministry at the Jordan River. John the Baptist, in a flash of revelation, was the only one at the riverbank that day who understood that baptizing Jesus was unnecessary. Even as the crowd was speculating whether John himself was the Messiah, John knew the truth. His baptism was “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” and John knew that Jesus needed neither repentance nor forgiveness. Matthew reports that “John would have prevented” Jesus’ baptism, but Jesus instructed him that it was necessary “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt 3:14–15).

Why did Jesus come for baptism, when he had no need for repentance, forgiveness, cleansing, or washing? By being baptized Jesus put himself on our level, as one who takes on himself the need for repentance and forgiveness. At the moment of baptism, the heaven opened, the dove descended, and the heavenly voice said, “You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased”—a reinforcement or restatement of incarnation (“the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”). Jesus was born as one of us, and now begins his ministry by becoming like us in accepting the baptism of repentance and forgiveness that we need.

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SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY: JOHN 2:1–11

John avoids the word “miracle” for what Jesus does and uses the term “signs.” The seven miraculous signs that John reports are all followed by what they reveal about Jesus. What is the “sign” at the Cana wedding? It is not the kind of miracle Jesus usually does, where he heals the suffering of sickness, blindness, demon possession, hunger, or death itself. True, it saves the host the embarrassment of running out of wine; but there is more: Jesus produces more wine than necessary, and, more important, far better wine than would have been expected. The key to the story is the comment of the astonished steward that “you have kept the good wine until now” (John 2:10). The sign in this story is that, with the coming of Jesus, God is showering us human beings with far more than we have ever received from God before. Jesus here tipped his hand, so to speak, that the disciples were in for a ride they never dreamed of. This was no mere itinerant preacher, but one with a glory the likes of which they had never seen. They not only beheld his glory and believed in him, but would now be swept up in an adventure that would change their lives and the lives of everyone coming after them!

Surprise and shock always accompanied Jesus’ signs and miracles. Here he

surprises everybody—Mary, who probably wasn't sure what he would do; the servants, who were baffled when Jesus told them to fill the jars with water; the steward, who was taken aback at the excellence of the wine; no doubt the host, who was facing acute embarrassment upon hearing that the wine was running out; and finally the entire assembly, when suddenly their next goblet of wine was far better than anything they had drunk so far.

How often we lifelong Christians lose that sense that Jesus intends to remake us. We have come to expect that being a Christian is a good way to live, a rather acceptable and comfortable brand of *vin ordinaire*, as the French call their table wine. But just when life is going rather well, Jesus means to shower us with the really good stuff!

THIRD AND FOURTH SUNDAYS AFTER THE EPIPHANY: LUKE 4:14–21
AND LUKE 4:21–30

Jesus' first hometown appearance after his baptism and temptation is one of the great dramatic scenes of the gospels. The description is full of details, as the local boy returns to the oohs and aahs of the home folks. The seminarian comes home to preach to his proud family, former Sunday School teachers, and neighbors, all of whom remember him as the nice young boy who helped his father in the carpenter shop.

Jesus reads Isa 61:1–2 from the Septuagint (although the actual text is a combination of Isa 61:1–2 and Isa 58:6). Jesus replaces the Hebrew verb “to call for” (in Isa 61:2a) with the verb “to proclaim,” which implies that Jesus is not merely asking for, but actually claiming to usher in, God's new time.

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Unfortunately, in the pericopes the story is chopped in half and spread over two Sundays, so the first Sunday misses the ironic shift—the point of the whole episode—when it sinks into the listeners that their local boy is using messianic language (“he has anointed me”) and making claims that no mere human should make. Furthermore, those who had heard reports of the early miracles wanted to see some razzle-dazzle. Jesus refused, and further fanned their discontent by pointing to Old Testament examples of God's helping not the hometown Israelites but foreigners, even enemies. In no time, the mood of the crowd turned from admiring to ugly, then to violent. Jesus left Nazareth, and we have no account of his ever again returning to his hometown.

Jesus has just started his ministry, and already the people are shocked and angry. From now on the lines will be drawn, for and against, and that story continues to the present day. The tragedy of today is that we have domesticated Jesus. He has become the loving man who accepts everybody and, by implication, just about everything. We have lost track of how offensive he can be. Read the Isaiah passage

again: Jesus has come for the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. How can we who are affluent by the world's standards continue to live comfortably without dealing with people who suffer these afflictions? To believe in Jesus means to be changed by him. We who have received new life from him cannot help but wish to bring new life to others.

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY: LUKE 5:1–11

A theme is emerging in the Epiphany gospel readings: Jesus brings new life into the lives of those around him and into our lives as well. The Gospel for this Sunday describes the disciples' inability to catch fish until Jesus instructs them (the same predicament as the post-Easter fishing expedition in John 21:4–8). Suddenly the catch is so massive that the nets almost rip apart. It is an echo of the Cana wedding, where Jesus produced much more and much better wine than was needed.

The story is full of human touches. Peter first calls Jesus "master" (Luke is the only gospel where Jesus is called "master" by his disciples). But when the disciples are overwhelmed with fish, the awestruck Peter then addresses Jesus as "Lord," knowing that Jesus is far more than a savvy fishing guide.

Peter's reaction is so very human. We humans are impressed in the presence of greatness, but with Peter it is more than that. He knows himself to be in the presence not only of greatness but of *goodness*, and that makes him acutely aware of his shortcomings, yes, sinfulness. "Go away from me, I'm not worthy," he says, a typically human response to the divine presence that one finds many places in the Bible. Jesus' reply is also typical of him, and we will hear it often throughout the gospels: "Do not be afraid."

The key to this story is in verse 10. In Mark 1:17 Jesus' response is, "I will make you fish for people." Luke uses a different term, meaning "you will take people alive," the same word used in the Septuagint for saving the lives of endangered people (Num 31:15; Deut 20:16). This avoids the idea that when we catch fish they die. Rather, the disciples will catch people that they might live.

Overwhelmed by this experience, the disciples left everything and followed Jesus. This is the first time Luke uses the word "to follow." Others had seen Jesus perform miracles, but now Jesus singles out Peter and the others personally, and they leave their fishing boats behind to follow him. They know nothing more than his promise that they will catch people alive, rescuing them from whatever endangers them.

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY: LUKE 6:17–26

The reading sequence now skips several paragraphs, from Luke 5:12 to 6:17, presumably because the stories in between are read from other gospels elsewhere in the lectionary. This brings us to Luke's version of the Beatitudes. Luke reduces the eight Beatitudes in Matthew's Gospel to four, but adds four "woes." This brings us back to Jesus' sermon in Nazareth (Epiphany 3 and 4) and reminds us of Jesus' use

of Isa 61 to announce his ministry. In that sermon Jesus pronounces his intention to rehabilitate the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. This is a judgment against those who enjoy their wealth and good living without regard for others—the theme of the “woes.” Jesus has come to turn upside down the way much of the world lives. Woe to a people and a society who enjoy comfortable living and disregard the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed!

By adding these woes Luke sharpens the bite of Matthew’s Beatitudes by stating explicitly the differences between these two visions of human life. Jesus announces a new way of looking at human life. In a world where the haves live in sharp contrast to the have-nots, Jesus says that the haves need to attend to the needs of the have-nots. It’s no longer a world of “each for one’s own,” but a world where humans live in community. Jesus is not inventing the wheel here but bringing to the forefront the ideals of the Old Testament prophets. This is typical of Luke, who, throughout his gospel, continues to stress this vision, including many episodes that deal with the use of wealth.

LAST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY (THE TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD):
LUKE 9:28–36 [37–43]

The story of Jesus’ transfiguration is about Jesus, not about our experience of Jesus. Many of us have preached this text as an illustration of the need to return to the nitty-gritty valleys of daily life after a thrilling moment of religious feeling. That might be a paragraph at the end of the sermon, but it’s not the sermon. This story is about who Jesus is, and it is placed here at the end of the Epiphany season to round off these Sundays of the epiphany or manifestation of Jesus’ identity. We have heard about the baptism, the first sign, the first sermon, and the first calling of disciples. We have heard the programmatic announcement of beatitudes and woes. Now, put it all together and we see Jesus transfigured with Moses and Elijah.

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Here is another case where the meaning of the story is connected with its context, which the person listening in the pew will not have heard. Jesus has just revealed his messiahship to his disciples and then foretold his death, a shocking and discouraging prospect. In the midst of these tumultuously conflicting feelings the three disciples join Jesus on the mountain.

Note that the transfiguration takes place during prayer, while Jesus is in close contact with the Father, a detail Luke alone notes.

Note also that Peter gets it wrong. He proposes to build three booths—we suppose to set up a persuasive tourist attraction—“not knowing what he said,” as Luke adds. Peter’s ignorance is not his failure to recognize the need for Jesus to return to the valley to continue his way to Jerusalem and the cross. Peter’s mistake is

his proposal to build three booths, as if Jesus now joins the triumvirate with the other two as the three main biblical figures. No, the point of the story is that Jesus is alone the culmination of the law and the prophets, the finale, so to speak, of the biblical drama. Had Peter proposed one booth, Jesus would not have accepted, but at least Peter's suggestion would have accurately understood the scene.

This story is about Jesus. Yes, of course, he and the disciples had to return to the valley, and we too live in the valleys rather than some sort of continuous religious ecstasies. That's probably why the lectionary committee recommends the addition of verses 37–43, to make clear that the transfiguration is an important but transitory element of the story.

The story means to tell the disciples and us who Jesus is, the definitive revelation of the Father, the Father's Word made flesh. The upcoming Lenten journey and *via dolorosa* of Holy Week will be somber for us, as it was devastating for the disciples. But the memory of the transfiguration will sustain us until the empty tomb of Easter.

POSTSCRIPT

Looking back over the Epiphany gospel readings, I will add a suggestion for preaching in these weeks to come: be aware of the fullness of what Jesus brings to human life. In preaching about Jesus, we preachers naturally tend to gravitate to those aspects of Jesus' life and work that mean the most to us. But Jesus didn't come for just one thing or to respond to just one human situation. His life, death, and resurrection address the human predicament in many ways.

The overarching problem of the sixteenth century, that time of tormented consciences, was God's severe judgment against sin, and thus the gospel message of Jesus' ministry was salvation by grace. But that is not the problem of many people today. They may not feel any condemnation from God, but they do feel that life is without meaning, or that their families are fragmented in disarray, or that the uncertainties of this world fill them with apprehension. In preaching law and gospel the preacher needs to discern what forms of law and what burdens of life prevent people from restoration to true living in Christ.

Remember in *Godspell*, when the returning prodigal son and the chorus sing "We Beseech Thee"? The chorus names problems we humans face, and the son answers how Jesus meets these situations. If we are sick we come to Jesus for a cure; the guilty look for mercy; those burdened by evil look for purity; the blind wish to see; the bound ask for freedom. From our various needs "we beseech thee to hear us!"

How does one preach an expanded view of Jesus' work among us? Consider the four pillars of Jesus' presence on earth—incarnation, life and teaching, crucifixion, and resurrection. Which one or two do you tend to emphasize? We all have our preferences.

Incarnation

To preach about the incarnation is to focus on God's becoming a human being. This is the tradition of Alexandrian Christianity, of Athanasius and Irenaeus, and carries its influence into Orthodox Christianity today. Incarnation christology tends to view human life not merely as sinful but with the potential of divine goodness. "The divine becomes human, so that humans might become divine," might characterize this view (although that saying can be more misused than helpful). In this perspective, salvation is not an escape from earthly life but the restoration of true life on this earth, because our Lord became a human being. With the incarnation, God is not abandoning this sinful world, nor condemning it, but entering the drama to restore it.

Life and Teaching

An emphasis on Jesus' actual life—his miracles, teaching, etc.—has enjoyed a renaissance in the last decades, thanks to a renewed interest in Jesus as a bringer of freedom or liberation, an advocate for the poor and outcasts, a healer of diseases and afflictions, a teacher about true living, and so on. We preach not only the fact that the Word became flesh (incarnation), but we proclaim what this Word-made-flesh actually did and said. In the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, we sometimes pray after Holy Communion that Jesus is "a model of the godly life" (p. 74)—though we do preface this phrase with "a sacrifice for sin," so the prayer is not narrow.

It is interesting that none of the Apostle Paul's christological affirmations includes a reference to Jesus' actual experiences of life—his parables, teachings, or miracles. There are reasons for this, of course, which are beyond the scope of this article. Today there is more danger from the other extreme, making Jesus an example for human life with no need for the cross and empty tomb. Jesus has become very popular among New Agers and people interested in spirituality who prefer to avoid the theological speculations of incarnation, the messiness of crucifixion, and the unscientific notion of resurrection.

The problem with this focus is that if Jesus is only "a model of the godly life" we miss the cosmic drama of the Word made flesh. At least two generations of preachers were shaped by Gustaf Aulén's *Christus Victor*, in which the Abelard type of christology—Christ as example of ideal human life—clearly came in third, behind the atonement and classical types. Abelard had scant influence in his own century, but since Schleiermacher and Ritschl and their twentieth-century descendants his star has risen considerably.

The lectionary forces us to take seriously Jesus' life and teachings, because the gospel readings march us through one of the gospels each year, with much of John's Gospel interspersed throughout.

Crucifixion

Jesus' crucifixion is the central focus of Western Christianity. The cross is the

central symbol in virtually all our churches. In defending himself to his Augustinian brothers in Heidelberg a year after posting his ninety-five theses, Luther coined the term “theology of the cross” to characterize his own theology.

We are accustomed to believing and saying that “Jesus died for our sins,” but a further explanation of what that means comes harder. The theology of sacrifice to God has little currency today. The idea that God sits in heaven and becomes merciful only after Jesus dies as a satisfaction for sins is not only unappealing but unbiblical. Yet the concept of a person giving his life for another or sacrificing something for another is easily understood and happens all around us. However we might “explain” the crucifixion, our affirmation is that something did indeed happen on a cosmic scale when Jesus died. He died not only because the religious political authorities considered him blasphemous and dangerous. The gospel writers are far more dramatic than that. When Jesus breathed his last the heavens were ripped open, the earth shook, and the sky turned dark. Ever since that day the cross has cast its shadow over all of human life—believing in Jesus became, as one confirmation student told me, “a really, really big deal!”

Resurrection

The resurrection has been the towering affirmation of the Christian faith ever since Mary Magdalene rushed to announce to the disciples that she had seen Jesus in the garden. It is the indispensable cornerstone of Christianity. “If Christ has not been raised,” Paul writes, “then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain” (1 Cor 15:14). The resurrection is the capstone of Christ’s incarnation, life, and death.

*“the resurrection does not cancel the cross; our
resurrected and ascended Lord is always our crucified
Lord with his pierced hands, feet, and side”*

Our temptation is to make the resurrection not only the last word but the only word. By stressing the resurrection it is easy to become triumphalistic and lapse back into a theology of glory. It is tempting to think that, thanks to the resurrection, we are the winners, we are the victors and, that being the case, we Christians can swing our weight around in this world as we please. The antidote to that trend is to realize that the risen Christ is still the crucified Christ. The resurrection does not cancel the cross; our resurrected and ascended Lord is always our crucified Lord with his pierced hands, feet, and side, in contrast to some of the powerful and imposing portrayals of the risen and ascended Lord in Christian art.

For some odd reason many Lutherans and other Protestants believe that the proper cross in the church sanctuary is an empty cross, symbolizing that Christ has risen. Perhaps this was to distinguish ourselves from the Roman Catholics, who always feature the suffering Jesus on the cross. When I was living in Europe I served

as a civilian army chaplain, taking care of army chapels on bases too small for a regular military chaplain. One of my frequent partners was a Jesuit priest. He would say mass and I would do the “General Protestant” service. We were always amused at the cross supplied in American military chapels, designed for multipurpose use. On one side was the crucified Jesus, but his figure was smaller than the cross itself, so that when it was turned around the Protestants would see only an empty cross. The two of us could worship with either side, but the diligent chaplain’s assistant would always turn it back and forth for the proper service. The practice was theological nonsense, of course. Neither the crucifixion nor the resurrection makes sense without the other.

In the Chapel of the Cross at Luther Seminary Paul Granlund’s bronze statue of the crucified Christ stands not on the front wall but in the midst of the pews. It is a graphic reminder that the crucified Jesus is not an object to look at, but that he lives among us, and that as Jesus’ disciples we too follow the way of the cross. The irony of our campus is that we also have a Chapel of the Incarnation—but no Chapel of the Resurrection. One visitor commented that on our campus we apparently get Jesus born and crucified but not raised. I replied that I hope and trust that the resurrected Christ is present in lectures, Bible studies, and in our worship!

Epiphany, Lent, and Easter

The post-Christmas church year is a seamless progression from baptism to empty tomb. Every gospel lesson from now until Pentecost will deal with these grand themes at the heart of our faith: Jesus’ incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. None of these four pillars of preaching Jesus Christ stands alone; they are interwoven into a magnificent tapestry of life, death, and finally resurrected and ascended life. Here in the North at least, natural realities enhance the symbolism: we will preach these themes beginning in the dark days of January winter and we will continue each Sunday as the daylight lengthens each day. ⊕

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