

Epiphany - the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus

by Michael Flowers

Michael Flowers' sermon explores the significance of Jesus' baptism as a profound manifestation of God's humility and love for humanity.

Duration: 33:13

Scripture: Genesis 1:1, Matthew 3:13-17, Matthew 22:37-39, Matthew 28:19-20, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22, John 2:13-17

Topics: "Epiphany"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker begins by asking the congregation a series of questions about their commitment to God and their beliefs in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The speaker emphasizes the importance of proclaiming the good news of God and loving one's neighbor. The sermon then shifts to discussing the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, highlighting its significance as the launching of Jesus' ministry. The speaker draws parallels between the River Jordan and the gateway to the promised land in the Old Testament, emphasizing Jesus as the new Joshua leading his people into a new promised land.

Transcript

Welcome to the first Sunday of Epiphany, where we are contemplating the baptism of Jesus and discovering why the Church, down through the ages, has chosen this particular feast, this particular text, as well, for the first Sunday of the season. Epiphany means manifestation, a manifestation of the divine, and if you will, a theophany, an appearing of the divine, an appearing of God, God lifting the veil, as it were, rent the veil in two and letting us see something of his nature, a revelation of his being. Today, we're going to consider two manifestations.

One is covert, it's a covert manifestation, and then the other one is very overt, and depending on which gospel accounts you're reading, you're going to get different insights into what the gospels are up to, what they're trying to emphasize, and they're really, really different. There's a lot of variety, and all four gospels share this particular event, and you know, it really is an embarrassment. The baptism of Jesus is an embarrassment, and it begins with the embarrassment of John the Baptist.

He's perplexed. I mean, he was raised knowing that one day he would be that voice crying. He's the one that leapt in the womb at the announcement of Jesus, you see, and so he's been waiting.

He's been waiting for this day. This is like a climactic point for him, and he's had all of these great old prophetic fiery words about how Jesus was going to manifest himself. He's going to come, and he's going

to clear the threshing floor, and he's going to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Man, it just sounds, wow, I don't know if I want to be around when that manifestation happens, you know. This sounds really, really heavy, and so in preparation for those words, much needed words to the nation of Israel, John doesn't go to the temple and set up the Messiah is coming program where it would be normal to go there where the mikvahs were and where people could take ritual baths and be cleansed. And John was raised by a priest, so he would be very, very familiar with the temple.

And in fact, most scholars think that John is a priest. It was handed down from, you know, grandparents to parents to children. I'm just I'm seeing John as this great priest in opposition to the current temple activity.

And in fact, in St. John's Gospel, Jesus cleanses that temple before he does anything else. It comes in the beginning of his ministry, whereas in the rest of the gospels, it comes at the end. I'd say that it needed two cleansings, probably.

But anyway, a double portion of cleansing. And so, John, he's talking it up, you know, and yet he goes out from Jerusalem and he goes into this desert place and he's preaching repentance and the forgiveness of sins. And there are certain certain accounts that says that.

I mean, let me find the one that I'm thinking about right now. I think it's. Yeah.

When all the people were being baptized, this is Luke's account. Jesus was baptized, too. OK, and they were coming from all the regions.

And it says in another account that all Jerusalem, they were going out of Jerusalem, which is odd because anything to do with the Messiah, you'd be going up to Zion. But they were going out of Zion into the wilderness where this prophet they hadn't heard that kind of word, that kind of prophetic anointing. They hadn't seen the office of a prophet in some 400 years, you know.

And so he's back on the scene and he's they're all going out to him. And there is an amazing excitement about what's happening because God is speaking to us again. And so John's talking it up and there's epic expectations because of all of his words.

And then all of a sudden Jesus comes to the river Jordan and he quietly takes his stand in the muddy waters of the Jordan. No fanfare, no envoy. And well, John is the envoy, but it's not like a worldly king coming, you know, chariots and he rides up on a horse and clears everybody out.

He just kind of blends in with everybody there. He blends in intentionally. And this is also internally creating questions in John, like, wait a minute, this is this is feeling a little awkward.

And, you know, as I was reading this this morning, I was thinking about God is so understated. Is he British to our Brits in the room here? There's this understated quality about the Brits that we love, right? And in a sense, maybe it's the King James Version. No, I'm sorry.

But anyway, God seems to be acting in a very understated way here. He just comes and he just steps. This is the God man.

This is the one prophesied. This is the one who spoke creation into existence. Everything is created by him, for him and in him.

And yet there's not been this epiphany yet. There's not been this understanding. John gets some of it, but not all of it.

Have you ever felt like you get some of it, but not all of it? Yeah, that's that's the way it is most of the time. We know in part, we see in part, right? He comes to this river and he just steps into this muddy old, I mean, the River Jordan is not a very impressive river, but it's a prophetic river. It's where, you know, it was the gateway into the land.

The River Jordan coming out of the desert was the gateway into the promised land that God had for his people. And another Joshua actually walked across that river and brought the people of Israel across that same river into the promised land. And this is the new Joshua bringing his people into the promised land.

But it's going to be with the heavens opening in a voice speaking. This is my beloved son. It's going to be a different exodus.

But this is what we call Joshua is leading a new exodus. Death passes over into life. And so he comes and he takes his stand among sinners.

And as I said, John's baptism is one repentance, a cleansing of sin. The multitudes are coming. They're confessing their sins.

And so John is very puzzled. And in John and Matthew's account, John looks at Jesus and said, no, you should be baptized me. Well, first of all, John's just thinking Jesus has forgotten his lines.

You know, you've never been in a situation like that where you've you're working with someone and you're waiting and they've got your lines and they got it all mixed up. And, you know, you just kind of have to spontaneously play as if, you know, I'm going to I'm going to make this up as I go now. And that's that's John's sense is that Jesus has forgotten his lines and we're going to have to walk through this together.

You should be baptizing me. And then Jesus says, no, no, let it be to fulfill all righteousness. Now, remember when we started this gospel and remember how John's gospel begins.

Remember how creation begins. Remember how Genesis begins, like Mark's gospel begins, rather than in the beginning. The word is beginning and it's really calling forth those echoes of creation.

This is new creation language now. Let it be. Let there be a new creation here in the waters of the Jordan.

Let it be to fulfill all righteousness. In the beginning, the spirit of God hovered over the waters and God said, let it be. And this is the one who said that out of the mouth of the father, the word, the logos, the disincarnate son at that time.

And now here is the incarnation of that word, that word made flesh who said in the beginning, let it be. And now he's standing in an understated way, not in this grand like, hey, guys, I'm the creator here. Very, very downplaying who he really is.

You know, creation has at this point gone amok, and that's why the God man is on the scene. And this is the one who affected creation. He had to fulfill all righteousness by getting into the muck with us.

It had to be this way. He couldn't do this from heaven. All the church fathers agree as they contemplate redemption and incarnation.

God comes down to the bottom of the mud and enters into the same state with us standing in the Jordan with sinners from the highest place of honor. He descends down to the river to pray. Remember that song? I love that song down to the river.

And he prays in Luke's account. He's praying the world is made right by the humility of God without Jesus leading the way of seeing the father, the almighty. If you've seen me, you've seen the father.

He says we would not see lowliness as a virtue. We would not be celebrating humility and we certainly wouldn't see it as a divine attribute, a part of the divine nature. God is not only almighty, but he's mightily humble.

God is humble. If there's any humility that we can eke out in walking in the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, in our broken state, it's coming from him because we are not prone to be humble. None of us are prone to be humble.

That's what we're falling. You see, you see, pride was what caused Satan to fall in. Pride was what caused in the garden the fall.

And therefore, he's standing in the river and he's saying this is the way I'm going to show you how I'm going to reverse that high minded pride by lowliness. Pride is not only comes before the fall. Pride caused the fall.

God sets right a world gone mad and he does it by going down. And by the way, that's what Jordan means to go down. That's the meaning of the word.

Stooping low, Jesus continues his descent into lowly servanthood, into our confusion, into our darkness, into our failures, into our inconsistencies, our prayerlessness, our loneliness, our alienation, into our despair. Into our sin and stands beside us in the muddy waters of the Jordan and begins the mission to fulfill all righteousness. Now, don't get me wrong.

Jesus is not a sinner. No, what he took upon himself is something infinitely more severe. Later on, as Paul would contemplate his revelation, his epiphany of Jesus on the road to Damascus and as that began to unravel and as he began to get back into the scriptures, he would conclude in second Corinthians that Jesus was not a sinner.

Jesus became sin. He became sin who knew no sin that we might become the righteousness of God Christ. This is a mystery church.

This is a mystery. I don't understand this. I must say it.

I don't understand this. This is a manual. God with us.

Think about us, the sinful, alienated ones showing us what God is like. No condemnation, no finger pointing, standing with us in solidarity in the mud of the Jordan. He humbled himself and he humbles himself and completely identifies with everyone coming to John.

It's not like I'm Joshua and you're the sinners. That's not the stance that Jesus is taking. He's the people's God, God for the people, so much so that he becomes a people.

He becomes a person. He becomes a human person. That is that divine person and that human person come together in Jesus Christ in the midst of the Jordan, around all the sinners involved in confessing their sins.

So think about it. If you were starting a ministry or if you were starting something, you know, we would we would utilize all of our social media. We do this as a church.

We have a website. We have Facebook. We have Instagram.

We have all this great stuff. And we're trying to we're trying to project to those who are checking out our community a bit about what we're about, this young little church plan. And we're trying to put our best foot forward always.

Right. I mean, if you're starting a ministry, you want to put your best foot forward. It's a coming out.

It's a launching. Well, that's what this is in Jesus. This is a launching of his.

This is how God launches his ministry. No mail outs, no flashy, glossy mail outs, no TV advertisements, just muddy, dirty feet. And standing in solidarity with those who would never go to church.

You see, this is Jesus. He's not religious enough for us. Jesus is not religious enough for most Christians in America.

He's an offense. The cross is a scandal on him. He remains an offense.

He looks good always. That's that pride again that wants to get in. It's so subversive.

It's so deceptive. And the church wants us to contemplate this today. You see, you know, you can read the scripture and you won't maybe probably won't get much out of it.

You must contemplate the scripture. You must take time with the scripture. If you get anything at all, if you can see anything about what I'm talking about, it doesn't come by just reading it.

It comes by immersing yourself in the presence of the one who is being revealed today. And so let's contemplate this today. Let's think, oh, Lord, what are you like? These are your first impressions that you want to give me.

An act of lowly sacrifice, the sinless one standing in our place, unconcerned with the shame or the rumors this would ensue because later he would be called a sinner. This would be the beginning of that great impression. Friend of sinners.

Here he is. This might remind us of one more awkward passage between Jesus and Peter and the disciples. Remember when he pulls out the towel and he gets down and he stoops down and he starts to wash their feet and they go, no, just like John the Baptist.

No. And he says, unless I wash your feet, you can't have anything in me. You can't have no.

You can't have anything with me. You can't join my my revolution of love and compassion and forgiveness and mercy and humility. Unless you go through this, you won't be able to complete the journey, Jesus is saying.

And so he steps into the muddy waters again and he's saying that I completely identify with you. I stand with you and I am able to feel that word sympathize. He's able to sympathize with our successes.

No. Scripture says he's able to sympathize with our weaknesses. Again, this word of weakness is coming and Jesus is appearing very weak.

And this is the strength of God in this in this display of humility. And it's not self-conscious. You see, he's not trying to be humble.

He's not imitating humility. He is the embodiment of it. So he identifies with those weaknesses.

He's able to sympathize with our temptations. Because right out of this, he's going to go into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan for us. And this baptism is for us.

He's vicarious humanity going into the waters. All of creation is being renewed at this moment when divinity and creation touch that water, the waters are sanctified. This is what the church fathers always saw, the sanctification of the waters.

When Jesus steps into the muddy, filthy Jordan, he identifies with our struggles, our emotion, our emotional ups and downs and unavoidable circumstances and events which enter our lives like, you know, those. What happened? Glad that's over. It's kind of I hope I never have to go through that again.

Experiences he knows he identifies with that. He says, I am a manual God with you in solidarity with you. That's the first epiphany.

That's the covert epiphany. God is very different than what we would conceive in terms like almighty and omnipotent and all of these great, you know, don't touch that kind of theology. Now, God says, I want you to touch that.

I'm going to become flesh so that you can touch me and I can show you the father and I'm going to wash your feet. I'm going to wash your heart because I'm all about forgiveness and grace and mercy and transformation because of that. Transformation comes out of knowing a God who stands in our place and becomes one with us.

It's a beautiful thing. And if you've seen Jesus, you've seen the father. This is what the father's like.

Well, the next epiphany is an epiphany, a manifestation as he goes into the water and says, just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn apart. It's the same word in Mark's gospel as later on on the cross when the veil was torn apart in the temple, in Herod's temple. God never showed up, really.

Not like the first temple. And so what do the prophets mean when he said the latter glory of this house will be greater than the former? It wasn't Herod's temple. It was Jesus.

Jesus is the temple. Destroy this temple in three days. I'll raise it up.

He says, I am the new temple taking you through the new exodus. And I'm the new Joshua. You see, do you get it? He's saying, do you get me? Oh, man.

And then that voice comes out when that when the heavens are torn open, the veil and the heavenly veil is torn open. This is what's happening in Jesus. And the spirit is descending on him like a dove, like a dove.

This is a simile. And so, yeah, the dove is a symbol. But, you know, as far as I can find the dove as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, it's in all four gospels.

And that's basically where it's at. Symbol of the Holy Spirit. But it comes down and maybe it's it's it's going back in echoes of when the ark was out and the dove would come and they knew that the floods had ended.

Maybe it's that dove of peace that no more destruction in this man. And then a voice came from heaven. You are my son.

He's speaking personally to Jesus and Mark. You are my son whom I love with you. I am well pleased.

And the church would say this is not the text for epiphany, really. This is the text for Jesus. You've got Matthew and you've got John's account saying this is my son.

In other words, the father is addressing those in the Jordan and those around the banks of the Jordan. And it is an epiphany. And he's speaking to all.

This is my son, my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased. What did the father do? Did he say you are or this is I think both accounts are simultaneously going on in the heart of Jesus. He's hearing it as the father speaking to him.

You are my beloved son. And those around needing this epiphany, needing this revelation of the Holy Trinity. You see, this is the epiphany of the Holy Trinity.

Not just Jesus. This is my beloved son. They're hearing this is take note.

This is my beloved son in whom I'm well pleased. It's the voice of Abba. It's the voice of a father like no father we have ever experienced.

I just want to ask the Lord as we're contemplating this, if you've had horrific or negative encounters with your father and it's blocking your relationship to the father, this voice, I pray today that that could be broken off of you. The beginning of that could be broken off of you where you don't see God the father through the lens of your earthly father, who is perhaps violated or done something very, very disappointing. This voice is the healing for that voice.

And Jesus is opening the heavens for you so that you don't have to live with the earthly voice. You get to live with the heavenly voice. Sometimes we have to fight for the heavenly voice to hear it.

Because the earthly voice is so powerful and it defines who we are. This voice must define who we are. And you hear that voice through contemplation of the scriptures.

God will speak to you. You are my beloved son. You are my beloved daughter in whom I am well pleased.

This is Christianity. Now, there's an echo of Isaac being referred to here in the Greek version of the Old Testament. Genesis 22, when it speaks of Isaac, Abraham and Isaac.

Here's the here's the typology coming in. Jesus is getting this. God is saying to Abraham, I want you to take your son, your only beloved son.

And go where I'm going to show you to Mount Moriah. And so Jesus is hearing this in the voice of the father. He's getting a sense of his mission as he's getting anointed with the Holy Spirit as the spirit comes on and the father confirms.

Jesus knew who he was before this happened, you see, but it was a further, further manifestation and strengthening because his ministry is beginning now. He's coming out of inactivity and contemplation, years of contemplation. Jesus is.

Perhaps that's why he can hear the voice of the father so well. All the contemplation of the holy scriptures is coming up to this point. And now the father is sending him out into activity, evangelism, discipleship, preaching the gospel, warfare, temptation, crucifixion, resurrection.

But what a mission. And so as we contemplate the voices that we hear this morning, I pray that you would hear the voice of adoption. Instead of the voice that makes us feel like we're orphans, any voice that leaves you feeling like an orphan is not the voice of the father.

And it's an echo inside that needs to be healed. Jesus is the son. It's inheritance language and the son, the male son, is the one who actually inherited what the father had.

And so that's why Hebrews would say he is the heir. He's the heir of all things. Jesus is the heir.

And because he's the heir now, he shares that sonship with us. It's not a male or feminine reality in that sense. It's about sonship is about inheritance.

Sonship is about identity. And it's not our sonship. It's his.

And he's sharing that with us. And in a sense, we can be called sons because you are sons, Paul says. God has sent forth the spirit of his son into our hearts, crying out to a father.

You see, that's the voice that we need to hear. And so Jesus opens up this revelation of the Holy Trinity by stepping into the waters, the muddy waters of the Jordan and fully identifying with our darkness. And then all of a sudden, the heavens open and the heavens are open for those who are in Christ.

The heavens are open to us because Jesus has opened the heavens. And he's in the heavenly places now. And Paul would say later that we're seated with him in those heavenly places.

Where do you want to live on earth or in the heavenly places? Yeah. And out of the heavenly places, we invade this earth with the kingdom of God. And we say, thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, because our citizenship is there.

This one is returning. This one is returning. And everything that seems out of joint and undone in our lives right now and the struggle to to really know our adoption and our status in Jesus.

It's a struggle because we don't see everything in subjection to Jesus yet. And so we're in a battleground as sons and daughters wielding the sword of the spirit. And wearing armor for the warfare that we're in.

It's a bloody mess. But because Christ rose from the dead, we share that victory and Christianity. So watch when he said a long time ago, he said Christianity doesn't begin with a big do.

It begins with a big done. Christianity doesn't begin with a big do. It begins with a big done.

And Jesus has done it for us. And we stand in that grace and we we position ourselves to listen to that voice. You are my beloved son and you are my daughter.

And in you, I am well-pleased because I'm seeing you through the lens of my son, Jesus Christ. He became sin so that we might see you through the lens of my son, Jesus Christ. Righteousness of God in Christ, Jesus.

Amen. Let's stand this morning and instead of the nicing creed, I would like for us to turn to page 30, 32 in our booklets here, the larger booklet, not the bulletin. And let's stand together.

I would like for us to reaffirm our baptismal covenant together for those of us who have been baptized into Jesus Christ. This is why we put the baptismal font here as we walk in. There's blessed water in the font, just a little bit there.

And we walk in and we put our finger in that water. And we're thinking of the waters of the Jordan, right? In the Holy Spirit. And then our baptism.

And we make the sign of the cross on our forehead. And we reaffirm our baptism in our hearts as we're doing that. And this is the covenant that we will reaffirm together this morning.

Do you believe in God, the father, the father, creator of heaven? Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the son of God or he was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary? He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended to the dead and on the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the father.

He will come again and judge the living and the dead. Do you believe in the Holy Spirit? I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Will you continue in the apostles teaching and fellowship in the breaking of bread and in the prayers? I will with God's help.

Will you persevere in resisting evil and whenever you fall in the sin, repent and return to the Lord? I will with God's help. Will you proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ? I will with God's help. Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? I will with God's help.

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being? I will with God's help.

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