

# Open Heaven and the Baptism of Jesus - Epiphany

by Michael Flowers

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*Michael Flowers explores the significance of Jesus' baptism as a revelation of His identity and the opening of the heavens, inviting believers into a deeper understanding of their relationship with God.*

**Duration:** 26:15

**Scripture:** Isaiah 42:1, Isaiah 64:1, Mark 1:7, Mark 1:10-11, Luke 1:41, John 1:29

**Topics:** "Epiphany"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of not hardening our hearts and instead embracing the forgiveness, grace, and mercy of God. He highlights the concept of the Trinity and the deep relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The preacher encourages the audience to meditate on John 17 for a deeper understanding of this relationship. He also discusses the distorted perception of Christianity and the need for the church to proclaim the voice of the Father and embrace the beauty of art and music. The sermon concludes with a reflection on Jesus' baptism and the significance of the voice from heaven affirming him as the beloved Son of God.

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## Transcript

Welcome to the first Sunday after the Epiphany. It's Epiphany season, but it's after the Epiphany, which is the visitation of the Magi, these pagan, mysterious ones who recognize the Lord Jesus in his infancy more than his own people. That Epiphany would be that Jesus is the Lord of the nations.

It's not just for a little sliver of land and a small people group, but for all peoples of the earth, and the Magi were the first to recognize that as Gentiles. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for the Epiphany, and we long for Epiphanies, continual Epiphanies, to open the eyes of our heart that we may see.

Lord, we're distracted in so many ways and pulled in so many directions, and we ask that you would just allow us to co-inhere in you now by the unity of your Holy Spirit, that we may be here this morning in unity, constancy and peace. Thank you. Amen.

Let's be seated. Today's gospel reading in Mark 1, beginning with verse 7, it describes the baptism of Jesus, the baptism of Jesus submitting to not just any old baptism, but to the baptism of John, a baptism of what? Repentance. Thus begins the paradox.

What's going on? A baptism of repentance. What on earth is Jesus doing? John wonders the same thing. It doesn't tell us in this short account, but in other accounts, this is so important that it's in all four gospels.

Right. And in other accounts, John steps back when Jesus steps in the water and he says, wait, wait, I have need to be baptized of you. You baptized me.

Right. And so Jesus tells John to plunge him into the water anyway, plunging down deep. Don't let one hair be uncovered.

I'm adding some things here. Right. In order to what? To fulfill all righteousness.

OK. What on earth does that mean? OK. To fulfill all righteousness.

The name of the one who is being baptized. Jesus comes from the Hebrew. What? Joshua.

Joshua. Joshua is standing on the banks of the what? The Jordan. Wow.

There's some imagery coming forth here. Right. There's some acting out the whole nation of Israel.

Joshua standing on the banks of the Jordan. At this time, though, the Jordan will not part the heaven's will. This Joshua is the new Joshua who outdoes the first Joshua.

He outdoes us all, doesn't he? Amen. The potential for embarrassment. You think about who this is.

Of course, they didn't have the Nicene Creed in those days, but they did through revelation come to understand him as you're the you know, you're the son of God. They didn't fully probably get that until after the resurrection. Right.

It's OK. Here is this messianic figure, because these these Gospels were written after Paul's epistles were written. Right.

These are not first. We think because we're starting in the account of the Gospels of Jesus, they were written first. No, they were written in light of Paul.

They understand baptismal theology. They probably read Romans six. You know, they've probably been catechized by this this converted Pharisee scholar, Paul.

And so they've been hanging around each other, at least when you think about the majestic glory of this person. When you think about John one in the beginning was the word. Word was with God and the word was God, fully God and fully man stepping into the water to be baptized.

For the remission of sins, for repentance, it could be an embarrassing situation not only for the writers, as they have to give an account for this without giving it a theology, a theological explanation. Right. They're not giving the interpretation at that moment.

They're just giving what happened. And they have I'm sure they have to hold back now. This is why.

But but Mark and none of the Gospels really tell us that other than to fulfill all righteousness. That's a clue. We get a clue why this is happening.

OK, it could also be embarrassing for Jesus. It could be. OK, let's just think about that.

Yeah, it has the potential for being embarrassing to Jesus. And here is the irony in the fact that the one coming for baptism of repentance is described by John as the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. What are you doing in the water? What are you doing in this baptism? Our savior, our redeemer, without sin, is submitting to John's baptism of repentance, standing in line.

Think about it. They were all coming out to the desert. They were coming out to the desert because John had rejected the temple and its leadership and all that it stood for, because normally you would be baptized in the temple.

But no, John says, I'm in the wilderness. You come out to me because the temple, he had it in his bones. It's not going to be around very long.

John had this intuition because he was the one who leapt at the annunciation of Mary coming in the in the womb, in the in the belly of Elizabeth. He's already leaping and identifying Jesus. Right.

The lamb of God. Here's the lamb of God coming into the world through revelation by the Holy Spirit, conceived of the Holy Spirit and revealed by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Elizabeth. This is the one that's standing in line with sinners coming out into the desert to be cleansed.

Oh, in the waters of baptism. But in this gesture, God, fully human and fully divine, lays aside his glory and humbly joins us in our sinfulness, standing with us. He's standing in line with us.

He's going into the water with us and for us. This is a picture of his substitutionary life. Standing in for all creation.

Standing in for you and for me in the waters of the Jordan, a prophetic river. No doubt. It was the entryway into the promised land.

He's standing there and he's assuming our burden. He is able to soon put Mayo, says in Hebrews, to sympathize with our weaknesses together. Sympathize means to suffer with.

Sin, a fail together with suffering, that's what our ability to empathize and sympathize really is talking about, it's it's a co-inherence with the other person in order to connect with their pain, connect with their confusion, connect with their questions and doubts in a way where we can actually feel and not judge, but be there. This is what Jesus is. He's there.

He's Emmanuel, God with us as one of us. So good that he is one of us. God is one of us.

God became one of us, moved into our neighborhood, took on our flesh. And so before we move on to the outcomes of this gesture, this baptism, let's consider how Jesus pressed through a seemingly embarrassing situation, because for us, if we don't miss this, I think Jesus is showing us how to press through the possibility of our own reluctance to walk in obedience in light of our own struggle with inward shame. It's an example of what we should think about when we move into those situations and we're thinking in our and we're deliberating and we're saying.

I don't know who he is. You know, three times Peter went through this. I don't know this guy.

You ever had those moments in the world at work, at school, wherever those important people are that you don't want to be embarrassed around, right, by your faith. And so we find ways to sort of slip under the carpet and dodge the fact that we are born again Christians. Right now, there's a way to do that.

That is so obnoxious that and we're seeing too much of that anyway. Right. But I'm just talking about today a way to be authentically faithful.

Not obnoxious, but just authentically faithful. What does that look like? Because in this situation, Jesus was authentically faithful. I'm sure he despised the shame, says the cross.

But hey, that was a cross to standing in line with sinners, having no sin and submitting to what appeared to be a baptism of repentance for him. It was for us. It was always for us, his life is for us, it's never for him.

He's the most selfless, self-giving being in the universe. Out poured love and he goes under the water for us, despising shame, despising the possibility of being embarrassed. He wasn't embarrassed, but he could have been.

I could have been. I could have been Jesus. And then that sense of rejection and what will people think of me? And then we cower under the weight of peer pressure.

And it's just not kids in school that have peer pressure, right? We talk about kids have all this peer pressure, but we adults have overcome that, right? We don't ever compromise, right? No. Oh, just so many opportunities to compromise. But no, Jesus presses through and offers us an invitation.

He presses through this into this example of universal solidarity with humanity and creation. Here it is. I'm one with you and this is what it looks like.

I'm going to step into the mud with you, right? And get wet with you and get plunged under the waters. And I don't care what the rest of the line thinks that's behind me, because something's going to happen cosmically when I come up out of the water. And you'll know who this is because he didn't compromise the heavens opened.

And for you and for me, when we don't compromise, the heavens can open. And so he stands in our place as son of God and son of man in order to show us the way forward in our baptism and through our baptismal life in the world. Right now, Jordan means going down.

It's a downer. Here he goes. He's plunged into the downer of the Jordan.

Right. He's going down in reputation, in honor and privilege and all of this in appearance. We have to be really careful with how we want to appear, you know.

And he's going down, he's stepping into that place that's called going down. And his life began with the great coming down out of heaven. He's always been coming down.

He's been coming down out of heaven, being made man, being made a servant, a servant unto death. What was the voice that allowed him to do that unto death? Oh, I think it began right here when the heavens torn open and he heard this incredible voice. You are my beloved son in whom I'm well pleased.

Now, I think that was for Jesus to hear, but I think it's for us as well. It wasn't just a private party between God, the father and God, the son, you know, giving accolades back and forth. You're just so awesome.

It's so much more than that. And, you know, all of this is coming right out of the fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 42 that was read this morning. Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights, the father's quoting scripture and the scripture is actually quoting the father.

You know what I'm saying? It originated with him. And then he looks down in Isaiah 42 and he says, oh, yeah, I like that. Oh, yeah, I said that.

No, it's like you ever done that? You know, wow, I think I'll quote myself, you know. And so here it is. Isaiah caught a glimpse of this day.

Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him. What happened in the water? Not anything less than the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity coming down and anointing this king.

This is a coronation, as it were, for his ministry on Earth. The ascension was his ultimate coronation as king of the universe, but because of this coronation and because he heard that voice of affirmation and believed it and lived a life fully affirmed in his father, drawing us all back into the womb of the father to be closer than close. Right.

You know that what we talked about last week in the bosom of the father is another translation, but it's literally he was in the womb of the father. It's a literal word. It's a literal translation.

It's just translators just can't go there most of the time. You've got to get a French Catholic who knows Greek and he says, no, we're called into the womb of the father. Yeah, it's really good.

We don't have to be embarrassed by that, do we? Jean Beignet is who I'm talking about, if you know who that is. So just a beautiful saint who is still alive, actually, but beginning and the leader of L'Arche, who ministers all over the world to those children with disabilities. Here it is, what's going on, the heavens are opening, Jesus comes out of the water, something happens cosmically.

He saw the heavens torn apart, oh, that you would win the heavens and come down another Isaiah phrase. This is all Isaiah is like prophetic words getting fulfilled here. He saw the heavens torn apart like the veil in the temple that's going to be torn apart.

Rent, same word torn apart. No more split between heaven and earth, right, no more distance, no more alienation between heaven and earth, the heavens are open and they remain open in Jesus Christ. For in the last book of the Bible, John says, hey, I look up and I saw heaven open, you know, just like it's always open because Jesus has opened them and the father has spoken.

Ask, seek and not and heaven will answer. So I saw the heavens torn apart and the spirit descending like a dove on him and a voice came from heaven, you are my son, the beloved in whom I am well pleased. Wow, this is so important to the Orthodox Church.

It's called the Feast of Theophany. The the actual revelation of who God is until this moment, until Christ had Christ not become a human being, we would not know the revelation of the Holy Trinity, you see, because the incarnation and epiphany, Christmas and epiphany were always held together as as a one united feast until the fourth century. And then Christmas was separated.

It was not until the fourth century that the church celebrated Christmas all alone because they came to recognize the significance of the incarnation and they they came to recognize it in such a way they were able to change the calendar and create a separate feast. Now, today, in old calendar orthodoxy, which most of the Orthodox world is in the new calendar with us, but my son's Orthodox and St. Mary of Egypt is celebrating Christmas today. They're off the calendar because they're on the lunar calendar.

We're on the sun calendar created by Gregory the Great. Theophany is that important. It was all one event.

But now the theophany is so important that when the Orthodox Church, they actually go down to the waters in the community with oil and they're vested in the whole church goes down and steps into the waters and blesses the waters every year. Why? Because Christ stepped into the waters and sanctified the waters by his presence there. Amen.

To recall these events in a sense of deep worship. Thank you that the heavens were torn open and God, you revealed yourself as father, son and Holy Spirit. Don't ever let that just go through your lips in a way that doesn't connect.

I mean, when you say father, son and Holy Spirit, be mindful, let's be mindful. It's so easy just to say these prayers as if they just sort of pass through our lips without registering here. But this is what this day is for.

It's to recognize the baptism of Jesus and the theophany of the Holy Trinity. So Jesus comes up picturing resurrection life and the heavens open and God reveals himself. God, the father, God, the son and God, the Holy Spirit.

The early fathers used the word for this to describe the Holy Trinity and their relations. It's called perichoresis, perichoresis. Charles Williams, one of the inklings, took that word and he simplified it and he said it's like co-inherence.

What is perichoresis mean? Because we're describing now the relations of father and son and Holy Spirit. And what we're saying is that it is a dynamic interchange of love. It's a dynamic interpenetration, perichoresis means interpenetration, father, son and Holy Spirit.

All one substance, all one divinity in three persons dancing and taking each other's hands in a circle of love and reaching down out of heaven and saying, come humanity, come creation, come dance with us. I'm bringing you in through Jesus Christ to the communion of the Trinity. And it's a beautiful dance.

It's perichoresis, it's co-inherence. It's interpenetration of love and it's a love communion that we've been called into. And the words of the father verify this.

You're my beloved son in whom I'm well pleased. My beloved. Can you accept that this morning that you are his beloved? In the midst of the distractions and sort of maybe perhaps the struggle of these areas where you have some self-hatred, ask the Lord to come in and speak that over you again.

Listen, listen today, if you hear my voice and harden not your hearts, why would we harden our hearts? Because we don't want to dance in the circle of the Trinity, right? It's like depart from me. I'm an evil person. But there's a deeper place for us if we'll only accept his forgiveness and grace and mercy and go, wow, I'm in the sun.

The sun is in the father and the Holy Spirit is the love bond between the father and the son. And I'm called there. And if you want to get more exposition on that, John 17, go and spend the rest of your life meditating on John 17.

Yeah, it's good, isn't it? It is a beautiful relationship. This is what Christianity is, you guys. See, it's been turned into, you know, sinners in the hands of an angry God and distorted in so many ways.

But this is the voice of the father. This must be the voice of the church. This must be the voice of our church and our our leaders and our pastors in the flock here where we go out and we say you are his beloved.

Come into the dance of the Holy Trinity through Jesus Christ. I mean, you know, once the church restores its beauty, the world will flock. The world wants beauty and we've destroyed it through this last, you know, enlightenment period of time where where is the art anymore? Where is the music anymore? We still stand in Handel's Messiah as if this is like all we have.

We should have more. We should have more Handel's messiahs. We should have so so much more art that draws us in to the womb of the father.

Right. And it doesn't have to be religious to be beautiful, but it still draws us in. Right.

And so this is a beautiful exchange of love happening between father and son. And he just calls us into it. Lancelot Andrews, one of the Anglican divines, he describes the baptismal font as the womb of the church.

The baptismal font is the womb of the church. Why would you say that? Because those who are born of water and the spirit born, right, born of water in the spirit here in the Jordan, there's water in the spirit. It's an illustration of our baptism that Jesus is going first and standing in our place and we're going after him in imitation of our Lord.

And so when we're plunged into this water, the spirit comes upon us, the Holy Spirit comes upon us and we can participate now in union with Christ in his death and in his resurrection. Let us always remember our baptismal vows and the experience and reclaim. Now, those of you who were baptized as infants and you're struggling probably with, I don't remember that you're not saved by memory.

I'm sorry, you know, memory doesn't save you or I'm in trouble. Right. You're saved by grace.

How do people get saved if they don't have brains in a mind and they're disabled and they need to know the love of the father, but they don't cognate that, you know, in any kind of way. They're not saved through understanding. They're saved by grace.

And so I would say to any of you this morning that's struggling with your infant baptism, reclaim that. I reclaim my baptism all the time. And that's why we have the renewal of our baptismal covenant, because we always have to reclaim that.

Just go back to that moment and say, Father, thank you. I don't have a memory of this, but I know and I trust your grace. This is entry into the promised land, as it were, as I reappropriate that by faith.

And that's covenant, keeping God, keeping his covenant with you, think about that. And if you have questions about that, talk to me or talk to Father Les or others who who would maybe understand the beauty of infant baptism that, oh, we're going to baptize some infants this year and and children this year. And it's going to be a beautiful thing.

So we're preparing for that. In the name of the father and the son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Father, we come now before we say the Nicene Creed and we just open up our hearts and say, I want to get out of the way and let you in. I want to move every objection and every ounce of shame or disappointment. I want to move that away.

You're the one who rolls the stone away. Come and roll those stones away in our hearts. We can't do that without your grace and power.

And so come and roll stones away this morning so that we can receive the love of the father and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. And the fellowship, the communion of the Holy Spirit, we just say we receive it. We don't have to feel it, we just have to receive it.

Thank you by faith, through grace. We are your children.

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