

January 15, 2023. Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Let us pray. God of wisdom, by the power of your Holy Spirit, invite us into your Word. Give us ears to hear, wisdom to understand, and courage to answer your call to us today. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the gospel of John, chapter 1, verses 29 through 42. Listen now for the word of the Lord.

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ ³¹ I myself did not know him, but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” ³² And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Chosen One.” ³⁵ The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶ and as he watched Jesus walk by he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” ³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” ³⁹ He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. ⁴⁰ One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. ⁴¹ He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). ⁴² He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).

The word of the lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Last Sunday, we celebrated Epiphany. I think Epiphany is often a season that is overlooked in the church year. Because in the church year, Epiphany is 7 Sundays. It’s a season – like advent or lent – not just a day. It doesn’t end with the Magi – We have 7 Sundays to celebrate and reflect on God’s manifestation or self-revelation to the world in the birth of Jesus Christ.

We’re quick to move on from the Christmas story because we’re so familiar with it. And the holidays are exhausting. Once we’re back to work and back to school we’re ready to move on. But the season of epiphany tells us that the birth of the incarnate God into the world is worth remaining with just a bit longer.

Thus, it’s fitting that this story takes us back to John the Baptist. John gets so much attention in Advent, brining him up here again is a reminder that this story isn’t over.

The one who told us to prepare, to repent, is telling us not to move on from Christmas so quickly. We need to hear John the Baptist in Epiphany.

Our scripture for today is the Gospel of John’s account of Jesus’ baptism.

It is in the first chapter and follows the beautiful prologue that sets the stage for the story of Christ that John is about to tell.

This is the first time in this church year, which started with Advent, that we have the Gospel of John.

Amongst the four gospels, John stands out. John's gospel is different.

It's not really structured in the way we're used to with Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John places a strong emphasis on who Jesus is, the incarnate God, the world made flesh that existed from the beginning, fully human and fully divine.

And to believe in this incarnate God, John implores us to focus not so much on knowledge or doctrine, but to believe in this incarnate God is to see who the person of Christ really is, and to enter into a relationship with him.

Belief is always a verb – it's abiding with God.

The gospel of John also gives a greater depth of insight into the individuals in his various stories. This is certainly true in our scripture for today.

It's about Jesus' baptism – but if you read closely, there isn't a baptism at all.

Instead, we're hearing John the Baptist tell us the story of Jesus' baptism. In this way, the focus is not so much on the actual baptism – but what Jesus' baptism reveals about who he is.

Just as John's gospel stands out from the other gospels, John the Baptist in John's gospel is not the John the Baptist that we're used to in Advent – the one who prepares the way for the lord by preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Here in John's Gospel, he's not John the Baptist, he's really John the Witness. Chapter 1, verses 6 to 7, tell us "There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him." He came as a witness.

And here, as John tells us about Jesus' baptism, we see the fruition and power of his witness. Immediately before this passage, we're told the day before John was baptizing in the Jordan river.

Now, the next day, John sees Jesus and declares here is the lamb or God who takes away the sin of the world. And what's important to see here is that John didn't know he was baptizing Jesus. He goes on to say he didn't know Jesus until the Spirit descended from heaven as a dove and remained on Jesus – and this, God tells John, is the chosen one, the one who will baptize with the holy spirit.

Thus, in John's Gospel, Jesus was baptized in order to be revealed by John. And in this revelation witnessed by John and then told to us, we learn more about the entirety of who Christ is – he is the lamb who takes away the sin of the world.

Sin in the gospel of John, is not about moral or lawful designation, but instead, it's a synonym for not being in right relationship with God. Sin is what separates us from God.

It refers less to personal choices and wrongs than to the condition in which humanity exists when idolatry, alienation, and violence become normative factors in our lives.

Thus, Jesus as the lamb of God of who takes away the sin of the world is a promise of liberation for the whole of the cosmos.

Liberation from those powers that prevent us from being in relationship with God. And this liberation is not something we have to wait for – but is already here and underway – because this liberation is made possible when God takes on flesh so that we can hear him – see him – and know him right now – before our very eyes. so that we can be in relationship with him. John gives witness to that.

We put so much pressure on ourselves to be like Christ. To be a faithful follower of to be Christ's hands and feet in the world. It is a noble and worthy cause, to be sure, but in the end, maybe it's futile. Maybe we're setting ourselves up for failure. Because we're not Christ. We're not the incarnate God. We're not both fully human and fully divine. And putting so much pressure on us to be like Christ, can lead us to think it's up to us to save the world. and it isn't.

John the witness shows us that true discipleship is first and foremost about witness. John the witness' role is rather simple. He says "Look! Just look! Here is the lamb of God." That's really it. But that witness is so powerful that when two disciples hear this, they immediately followed Jesus.

John's simple words revealed Christ to them, inviting others to follow.

Witness, and then invitation. Can it really be that simple?

When the disciples follow Jesus after he is revealed to them by John's witness, Jesus asks them "What are you looking for?"

They are the first words Jesus speaks in John's gospel, and it is the same question Jesus will ask the guards who arrest him, and Mary in the garden after the resurrection.

The disciples respond with a question ... "Where are you staying?" In Greek, the word 'staying' could also be translated as abide. Where are you abiding? This word, while translated differently, is used 5 times here. The spirit came from heaven and abides on Jesus. They ask where are you abiding? Then the disciples saw where he was abiding and abided with him that day.

Thus, Jesus' question to the disciples who wish to follow him – to us – what you are looking for?

Our answer is where are you abiding Christ? So we can abide with you. To believe in the incarnate God is to abide with him.

To be with him in relationship. To be liberated from all that prevents us from abiding with God. And it's John's witness – Look! – that opens the door to this relationship.

The season of epiphany asks us to slow down, to remain in the Christmas story a little longer, to not leave with the Magi but to continue to look where God is revealed in Jesus Christ. But the incarnation is so much bigger than just the manger.

And just as John the Baptist prepares us for the birth of that revelation, now John the Witness shows us, disciples of Christ, how to respond faithfully.

And it's really simple. All we need is to be like John and say look! There he is! And Christ will take it from there.

Thanks be to God. Amen.