

Just What Are We Celebrating?

What no Epiphany? That's what you're thinking. We came to and went by January 6, and still no Epiphany. Not so fast. The Eastern, Greek, church celebrated the birth and Baptism of Jesus on January 6 calling it the Day of Light (*Reed*, 479). The Western, Latin, church emphasized Epiphany on that day and the Baptism of Jesus fell from our calendar till circa 1978. Well, just what are we celebrating today? How about a short story, a literary trope, and a science experiment?

First the story. The conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, the Great Conjunction, was in my Google newsfeed as if it were news. The fact that it happens once every 20 years makes it about as significant as the 17-year locust. O sure this is the closet in 400 years, but some locust years there are a lot more than others. But the Internet Generation loves whatever can be communicated by pictures and is sanctioned by 'science.' So, this might be the very Star of Bethlehem. Jesus can't be God in flesh and blood, can't have been born of a virgin, can't be the Sin Bearer and Ransom for all, but Jupiter and Saturn can do what Matthew says: "And the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was" (Matt. 2:9b). Stars, let alone conjunctions of planets, don't do that. An Arthur C. Clarke story, "The Star" is a better view. A star exploding in one galaxy destroys that civilization. This is the Star of Bethlehem which leads the Magi to a whole 'nother reality.

This is closer to the truth. DaVinci's unfinished "Adoration of the Magi" shows Mary, Jesus, and the kneeling Magi in the foreground. In the background is the ruin of a pagan building; the pagan world is being supplanted by the Christian which began with the Magi (the Gentile, pagan nations) coming and kneeling (www.leonardodavinci.net/the-adoration-of-the-magi.jsp) before Jesus. Fast forward 30 years in Jesus' life to His Baptism. El Greco's painting, which you see in black and white on the bulletin, has "agitated flamelike brushstrokes" which "imbue the tumultuous moment of Christ's baptism with a shudder reverberating through all creation" (*Ox. Hit. Of Wor.*, 823). Think these painting are over the top? Not for this text. Matthew and Luke have the heavens being opened, both passive, meaning we know from which side they were opened, God's. Mark, though, has the heavens *tearing* open. This is the atom being split, the heavens rolling up like a scroll. In Classical Greek, the phrase *schizōmenous tous ouranos* referred to a divine announcement. The Star of Bethlehem led to the Lord's Divine Announcement. Do you hear what I hear?

It's the Fifth Business. This is a literary trope. It's the character who is neither ally nor nemesis, but the catalyst or means for the protagonist to come to his essence or a clear understanding that leads to the resolving of the plot. The Fifth Business is an odd character that shows up every so often. He is the change agent that moves the plot (*King, Revival*, 1-2). Could this be John? His jumping for joy in the womb when Mother Mary greets his mom really underlines who Jesus is: the Lord, Yahweh. Then he disappears into the wilderness until the Holy Spirit says, "the Word of the Lord came to John...in the wilderness" (Lk. 3:2). The Word of the Lord hadn't come to anyone for over 400 years. And his location, "a desert region", his dress, like that of Elijah, and his diet, minimalist at best, all testify that he means business. Could he be the Fifth Business, the Change Agent? Sure, it could be John. Some of his disciples thought so; remember they had a hard time letting go of John and going to Whom he pointed. John could be the Change Agent, but Jesus is.

He's the One the Star leads to and His birth brings paganism and scientism, modernism, postmodernism, and all the isms you can think of to their knees. Listen to the preaching of 4th century church father, Ephrem the Syrian, on this score. He has Jesus saying, "By My baptism the waters will be sanctified, receiving from Me fire and the Holy Spirit...See the hosts of heaven hushed and still, as the all-holy Bridegroom goes down to the Jordan" (*ACC, NT, II*, 15). Or perhaps you prefer 4th century father, Chrysostom: "'He condescended to be baptized, not that [His] sins needed to be put aside, for He alone committed no sin, but that He should sanctify the waters of Baptism, so that one could trust that sins are washed away [by it]. The waters of Baptism would never be able to wash away sins merely by believing, unless the waters had been sanctified by the Lord's body touching them'" (*Peters, Baptism & Lord's Supper*, 86). Or how about the 3rd century father Gregory of Thaumaturgus? By sending the Dove, the Father points out Jesus as the new Noah to pilot the world that had shipwrecked (*ACC, NT, II*, 12).

Maybe you're more comfortable with Luther: "For here we see that Christ the Lord not only institutes it [Baptism] and commands it to be administered but also receives it Himself from His servant John and is immersed in the water, touching it with His holy body, not just to confirm Baptism but also to sanctify it and fill it with blessing.[Y]ou should not separate your Baptism from Christ's Baptism. You must come with your Baptism into Christ's Baptism so that Christ's Baptism is your Baptism and your Baptism Christ's Baptism..." (*LW*, 58, 48-49, 362). Jesus is the Change Agent. He came into our flesh and blood to do what we can never do, and to pay what we could never afford. He did this from womb to tomb, as the Man of Sorrows acquainted with grief. He was stricken, smitten, and afflicted so that by His stripes we are healed. But wait there's more. By doing this in our flesh and blood, He wins it for us, but how does He get the holiness, forgiveness, and pleasure of the Father to us? Not by our first birth, but by our second. And it's happened to every one of us, but we don't see the heaven's ripped open, paganism fall, or hear the Father shout from heaven: that's my boy; that's my girl. But we can.

We've had the short story "The Star", the literary device of the Fifth Business, now to the science experiment. In the 1950's, inversion goggles were invented that caused the wearer to see the world upside down. At first the wearer is incredibly disoriented and even in crisis, but at some point in the days-long experiment, his visual field flips over. And

he sees the flipped over world as normal (*Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 112). Luther himself said that Jesus coming to John to be baptized was “marvelously backward” (LW, 58, 44). Do you see this? Do you see that in the Baptism of our Lord not only is the pagan, sinful, fallen world undone, but reality is redone?

The text says, “confessing their sins, they were baptized by John.” No confession, no baptism. Whose sins does the sinless Jesus confess? Why yours, and if you don’t think that’s a big, big deal, a total flipping of reality it’s to be feared you’re not a Christian. Either you don’t know how many, great, and ugly your sins and sinfulness are or you don’t know what a big deal it is for the sinless Son of God to stand there in the Jordan saying, “I did that evil thing; I had this disgusting thought; I doubted this; I didn’t believe that; and I think God is unfair, mean, and has abandoned Me.” Yet, what happens even though the Man Jesus confesses to the filth, wickedness, and unbelief of a fallen world? Where does the Dove of the Holy Spirit land? On Him, the New Noah. See the full connection between Noah and Jesus. When Noah lets the dove out it returns to him because unlike the raven he had let out doves neither eat nor land on dead things. God the Holy Spirit doesn’t land on dead, sinful things. But He can land on Jesus because though confessing all our sins He is guilty of none.

The Early Church had a versicle and response that both confessed the flipped over world and the connection between Noah and Jesus’ Baptism. One part chanted, Gen. 6:6: “It repented the Lord that He had made man on the earth.” The response was, “This is My beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased” (Wenzel, *Commentary on Gospels*, 76). Recall this about the Greek preposition *en* used by the Father from heaven: It means *in*, *inside*, not *with* Jesus, is God the Father well-pleased. So the question is: are you inside Jesus? Where does your Baptism place you: In the baptismal command Jesus uses the Greek preposition *eis*: Baptize *into* God the Father, *into* God the Spirit, and *into* God the Son. Being baptized means you’re in Christ.

About 170 times Paul trumpets how different things are in Christ. Listen to how he describes your new reality inside Christ: *In* Him you’re the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). Redemption is yours *inside* Christ (Rom. 3:24). *In* Christ you’re dead to sin and alive to God (Rom. 6:11). And haven’t I quoted Rom. 8:1 ad nauseum? “There is now no condemnation for those who are *in* Christ Jesus.” *In* Christ, God “always” not sometimes, not most times, but *always* leads us in triumph, says Paul (2 Cor. 2:14). *In* Christ, we are new creations (2 Cor. 15:17). *Inside* Christ, God sees us as holy and blameless (Eph. 1:4). No wonder He bellows about how pleased He is from heaven!

“Where Christ is, there heaven stands open” and “it will not close till the Last Day”, said Luther (LW, 58, 74,73). These are the goggles through which to view your world. Christ brings us into Himself and we see the fall of paganism, heaven being torn open, and the 5th Business of Jesus changing everything in our life. We see contrary to reason, to logic, or common sense that we poor sinners who deserve nothing but wrath and damnation are not given these. Instead the forgiveness, life, and salvation that Jesus won on the cross is placed on our bodies, into our ears, and into our mouths. And all of creation, angels and archangels too, must serve us and our salvation. But the Devil, the World, and your own fallen Flesh want to rip those goggles off your face, and show you their reality.

Covid, government, and media try and they all try the same way: Trust men not God; trust science not religion. Everywhere the faith of the 1973 Humanist Manifesto II is proclaimed: “No deity will save us; we must save ourselves.” And the faith that in Christ God is on your side, you are His dear child, and He is your dear Father is openly ridiculed. It always has been and always will be by those not wearing the goggles of Baptism. Cain didn’t; Saul didn’t; Absalom didn’t; Judas didn’t; Peter didn’t for a while. We’re always tempted to remove them. What we’re celebrating today is that we don’t have to, and that’s worth celebrating any and every day. Amen

Rev. Paul R. Harris
Trinity Lutheran Church, Austin, Texas
Baptism of Our Lord (20210110); Mark 1:4-11