

Luke 3 Epiphany and Baptism

An epiphany is an “aha” moment. It is when the lightbulb goes off over the cartoon character’s head. They’ve just figured something out. And in the season of epiphany, as I mentioned, we are beginning to figure out who this baby born in Bethlehem will be and what he will do. The wise men come from the east and bow before him with gifts, and we learn that he is a King. Aha! And at the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, oh how much more do we learn!

John the baptizer is a prophet of God, the one like Elijah come again. And he is so wise and bold and godly the people are thinking maybe this is “the guy.” But he says no, he says “the guy” is Jesus, and even John, a prophet, isn’t worthy to untie his sandals. The most lowly task of a servant? “No – not me.” That is how great Jesus is. So we learn Jesus is more than a prophet. Aha!

And then amazingly, when Jesus is baptized and prays, he is answered. A voice from heaven calls out “this is my Son.” Aha! Though he is fully human, he is so much more, as the Father and the Spirit give witness to. And this Son didn’t get banished to earth for some transgression like a fake Greek god. No, the Father is well pleased with Him and the work he has come to do for us sinners. And so we begin to see this baby is not just some earthly Savior, like a David, but God himself, with the Father and the Holy Spirit. And so we learn that God doesn’t shift

forms, being the Father at one time, then the Son at another, then the Spirit at yet another. No, they are all here. One in their mission to save mankind. One. Which means that Jesus is no half-son, and half-god, but fully One and therefore fully God. Aha!

And we learn that he has come with a winnowing fork to separate chaff from grain. The grain to the barns, the kingdom. The chaff to the fire. He comes as judge. “Aha!” Or “Uh oh!”

We don't like to think of Jesus as the judge much. And for good reason, we sin. And if he judges, well, then is he the bad guy out to get us? More on that later. Even more, we like our Jesus to be nice, to be kind, and compassionate, to say gentle words, to never tell anyone they are wrong, but to just encourage them. We want Jesus to be a good coach. “Help us out a little, will ya? And don't expect too much.”

That's how we like our Jesus. And other people like their Jesus in their own way too. But, folks, there is only one living and reigning Jesus. There is only One Son of God, Savior. The question is: who is he? And isn't that the epiphany question? Who is he?

Everyone has to answer that question. Everyone. Some atheists, although rarer now thanks to our historical evidence, say Jesus never existed. In high school a

classmate mocked me saying, “Jesus is my favorite fictional character.” I wonder what he would say now... Most will say he lived, died, and stayed dead. Thanks to the Da Vinci Code, the gnostic gospels got popular there for a while. They are incredible documents written hundreds of years after the real Gospels and offer all sorts of wild theories about Jesus marrying and dying in Egypt. Some atheists go with that view. Some of our neighbors claim Jesus just happens to be the god of this particular planet, not the universe – to which I would challenge then – is he really God after all? Some think he is less than God. Epiphany asks: who is He? CS Lewis, I have mentioned before, puts this conundrum together like this. He says Jesus is either a liar (he said he was God, and wasn’t one – he was just tricking people or something), a lunatic (he said he was God and honestly thought he was God, but he wasn’t and needed to go to the insane asylum), or Lord (He said he was God and he actually is!). And so billions of people go about their lives slotting Jesus into one of these categories, more or less.

Once more, I ask, who do you think he is? Is he a political figure? As we debate whether he fits better on the right or left – answer: neither. Is he the super nice guy who just wants us to get along? If so, I’d tell you to read that Bible a bit more.

John, Jesus’ prophet, gets thrown in prison as we read today, for talking about sexuality – a hot topic today! Jesus talks more about hell than any other subject in the Bible, and gently or firmly (to the point of turning over tables) rebukes those

who are in the wrong. And, again, as we read today, he comes with a winnowing fork.

Who is wheat, who is chaff? How do you know? It is clear in scripture that the wheat, the saved, who go to dwell with God in heaven and in the new creation, are God's called and claimed believers. So how do you know you believe? Is it a feeling? Kind of but, not really. Is it knowledge, kind of but not really? Is it to be free from doubts? I certainly hope not. I think, if I can say it this way, belief is a state of being. For some, like the little of children or those unable to reason as fully, belief is something, praise God, thrust upon them. For us it is something that was thrust upon us and then as we reason as we grow as we feel, it becomes a state of being we can then confess.

Dr. Jordan Peterson, a psychologist from Canada, said he was "amazed" that he believed in Jesus. I like that. It wasn't "hey look at me I made my decision for Jesus. I'm so smart I figured it out!" No, it was the work of the Spirit and the Word and realities of the universe that fall into place and, "Aha! That's who Jesus is!" Talk about an epiphany. I had one in High School Biology, as many of you know, memorizing a cell pathway dozens of steps long, where if any step failed the cell died, and I remember, "Aha! This cannot be an accident." And so God works in our stubborn, doubtful minds and hearts to make us his own and keep us as his own.

And so who are the wheat? Those baptized in the name of Jesus who receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38-39). Those who confess his name, because you can't do that without the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12). It's those who call upon Him in faith. And epiphanies may happen, they may not, the epiphany, some other worldly experience, is not required for salvation, the work of God in your life is. And, God has promised, he is at work in your life. You hear his Word, the water washes on your head, the body and blood come to you. All are ways Jesus' work comes to you.

And so if Jesus isn't a super nice coach, is Jesus just a mean guy? A judge out to get us? No! And we know it because he came and did all that work for us. He wouldn't do that if he didn't care. He came to stand with us, sinners, and take our place, in a baptism for repentance he didn't need and on a cross he didn't deserve. And when you see that, when you see that God doesn't send an angel or a messenger to save his people, but he comes himself. That is love. We are not afterthoughts, we are not a side-project of his, he is not too busy with other things. He came himself, in person, and he came for you. Aha! God loves you!

And when we, by the power of the Spirit, realize this, the good news of a merciful God jump off the pages. He shows compassion, he weeps over the lost, he takes our burdens to carry them in himself, he forgives when we fall short, and he holds us in his arms which are strong, stronger than death. Because he rose. Oh, yes, he

rose. Talk about an epiphany for his people – no wonder they were so brave afterwards and wrote down his work for us to know, so that we can be brave too.

And you can. Because Jesus is real, and he might not fit into all our societal categories, but he is King, he is a greater prophet, he is God come down to judge, yes, but fear not because he came to carry your sin to a cross, he is stronger than death, and he did it all for you. That's who Jesus is. Happy Epiphany. In the name of Jesus.