



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY: THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD, JANUARY 11, 2026  
ISAIAH 42:1-9; PSALM 29; ACTS 10:34-43; MATTHEW 3:13-17

## PRACTICING EPIPHANY

***Matthew 3:13-17** [Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."]*

Epiphany. The word comes from the Greek, "epiphaneia," meaning "appearing" or "revealing." During this brief season between Advent and Lent, we leave mangers and swaddling clothes behind and turn to stories of shimmering revelation. Kings and stars. Doves and voices. Water. Wine. Transfiguration.

In Celtic Christianity, Epiphany stories are stories of "thin places," places where the boundary between the mundane and the eternal becomes permeable. God parts the curtain, and we catch glimpses of God's love, majesty, and power. Epiphany calls us to look beneath and beyond the

ordinary surfaces of our lives, to discover the extraordinary, the divine. We are called to look deeply at Jesus and see God.

Epiphany is a continuing reflection on the Christmas mystery – that God became flesh in the child of Bethlehem and divinity joined itself to humanity by a bond that can never be broken. What this means is that there is an abiding presence of divinity to humanity, if we just have the eyes to see it, if we can just pull the veil aside a bit to notice it.

Those are nice words, Rich, and of course I am preaching these words to myself because I need to hear them.

Because it's been a hell of a week, hasn't it? I'm having a difficult time seeing the Divine Presence to human life as Epiphany calls me to do. Let me just summarize some of the events of the last week: our country seems to be waging war against a sovereign nation and extracting it's alleged leader without congressional approval, oh and taking their oil reserves; the childhood vaccine schedule that has saved millions of children for decades is being diluted and dismantled; our President has made threats against Cuba, Columbia, and Greenland and, just this morning is contemplating military action in Iran. And, just as our brains were overloaded with chaos and harm, and our hearts broken and grieving, ICE agents killed Renee Nicole Good, a young mother in Minneapolis, and a day later shot a couple in Portland. It seems that King Herod and his reign of terror are alive and well.

I have professed belief in a self-revealing God my entire life but I'm having a hard time finding God in all this. God, where are you now? Where is your guiding star, your dove, and your voice? Where are you when we need you? I need you now.

So, I stand at the edges of this week's Gospel reading — Matthew's account of

Jesus's baptism — and find myself confused, exhausted, and afraid to leap. I don't want to enter the water. How can I bridge the gap between an ancient Voice and a modern silence? Heaven opened. A dove descended. God spoke. Really? I want to believe this. I really do.

I think part of the answer is that we baptize people on this day, The Baptism of our Lord. It's not just some ancient story; it's our current practice. We do today what was done to Jesus and the church has been doing it for more than 2000 years. Even in troubled times. For example, baptizing at night in secret when it was dangerous and illegal to be a Christian. Baptizing amid wars and plagues, where despotic rulers and foreign armies threatened to invade. Baptizing in prisons, and hospitals, and in concentration camps. We know that no matter what kind of evil and horror human sin can throw at us, we can always find new life and resurrection in the waters of baptism. Baptism tells us that love is the most powerful force in the universe. We are baptized into the death of the Lord Jesus so we can share in the power of his resurrection.

Sarah and Zac presented themselves for baptism at the 9 am service today. I asked them to reflect upon their

upcoming baptisms, and this is what they told me:

From Sarah: "This past weekend, we took a short visit as a family to a creek in Whatcom County called Canyon Creek. This is a beloved place and one of great spiritual importance for me throughout my life. We went to survey the changes from the most recent high water and wow it was changed - new log jams, bedrock scoured, and sediment moved, and big pools filled with large cobbles. The flood brings new area fossils to the surface of the creek and we found Jurassic palm fossils (~530 million years old) from the Chuckanut formation. The flood also exposed new flanks of Pleistocene (last million year) creek bed - bedrock eroded by ancient creeks that have since been buried under sediment and soil for tens to hundreds of thousands of years. So, there is a real, palpable experience with water and time when you walk the creek after such an event. I felt a lot of awe during our creek walk and the dynamic, ever changing, living and sacred nature of this place.

I suppose baptism for me is an entry way into these waters with God. I feel called to know in a different and embodied way that **God's work is powerful and good and everywhere -**

**and that I am a part of it.** Water brings change and new life and it also scours away old ways of being and rearranges our assumptions about "how things will be." I think I am seeking this kind of discernment of what is truly real and to see God in the world and other people - and to be grounded in the sacredness of the human experience and life itself." Wow! Thank you, Sarah.

It sounds like the waters of a flood can kill and destroy but it can also reveal a deep and sacred history - one hidden for millions of years. A beauty and new life that can be revealed and experienced through the eyes of faith.

Zac said: "I am trying to be less selfish and more connected." He went on to reflect upon the experience of diving into the water. "For so little commitment a dive offers such a big reward. It is a liberating feeling, the dive. It is such a letting go and yielding to other forces. Gravity is a force we swim in everyday but isn't noticed because it's constant and everywhere. The dive breaks that. It wakes you with its unusual quality of weightlessness and then comforts you in the embrace of the water. **I want to yield to something bigger.**"

And from Renee Nicole Good, the murdered woman in Minneapolis just a

few days ago, **“there is a kindness in the world, and we need to do everything we can to find it where it resides and nurture where it needs to grow.”**

Epiphany calls us to look beneath and beyond the ordinary surfaces of our lives, to discover the extraordinary, the divine. God has joined divinity to humanity by a bond that can never be broken. Epiphany tells us that there is a Divine Presence to human life and that God is in all things.

Today, as this community baptizes Sarah and Zac, we are called to practice Epiphany. The challenge is always before us. We are invited to look again. Look harder. See freshly and more deeply. Stand in the thin place, and regardless of how frightened, disgusted, or jaded you feel, cling to the possibility that you will be surprised by love. Epiphany is deep water — you can't stand on the shore and dip your toes in. You must take a breath and dive right in. Yes, baptism promises new life, but it always kills before it resurrects.

“God’s work is powerful and good and everywhere - and I am a part of it.”

“I want to yield to something bigger.”

“There is a kindness in the world, and we need to do everything we can to find it where it resides and nurture where it needs to grow.”

This is what it means to practice Epiphany. Jesus himself is our thin place. He's the one who pulls back the curtain and shows us the God we long for. He's the one who stands in line with us at the water's edge, urging us on and willing to immerse himself in the sin of the world — all so that we might hear the only Voice that can tell us *who* we are and *whose* we are in this sacred season. Look. See. Listen. We are God's own. God's children. God's pleasure. Even in the deepest water, we are Beloved.