

**“WHY BAPTISM?”**  
**Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11**  
**January 8, 2006**  
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Last Friday, with little fanfare in these parts, the Church Universal celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany. In other parts of the Christian world, January 6th, Epiphany, is a major event, marked with parades, festive meals, and the exchange of gifts. It is a celebration that commemorates the coming of the Wise Men, the Magi, the astrologers, the Kings—depending on tradition variants—to see the infant Christ, to pay respect to the newborn King of the Jews.

This morning, the first Sunday after Epiphany, the Wise Men are gone. The text for this Sunday is always the story of the baptism of Jesus, an event that took place around Jesus’s thirtieth birthday. To have these two stories—the Wise Men and the baptism—back to back in the lectionary, has always constituted an odd juxtaposition for me. In this arrangement, the lens of the church’s vision moves from panorama to pinpoint, from general and universal to absolute particular.

Think with me about this for a moment. The coming of the Wise Ones is a story written to place the birth of Jesus in a context larger than Bethlehem, larger than first century Judea, larger even than Judaism or the reach of the Roman Empire. These Wise Ones come from afar—from Asia and Africa. They are not Jews; they are gentiles. They come; they pay their respects, give their gifts, and then they leave to go back to their own countries. It’s such a familiar story to us that we don’t question it much. The kings add color and majesty to the Christmas story and a reason for giving presents, and we pretty much leave it at that. We don’t ponder how odd it is. And it is odd. Why is the baby Jesus visited by eminent persons of vastly different religious and cultural contexts? Why, beyond that, if they came to visit—why didn’t they stay? If the message and meaning of Christ’s birth is, as many believe, evangelical in nature, what do we do with these eminent spiritual leaders who visited the savior of the world, stayed a little while, and then went back to their own countries to again take up their cultures, their religions?

The story of the kings is not a conversion story. The story line does not go: they see the baby, realize they have lived in error, and are transformed. And I think that’s important. Instead of conversion, what we have is recognition, mutual respect. The gifts that the Magi bring to Jesus are not the kinds of gifts that would be exchanged by persons of unequal rank. They are the gifts one would bring to a peer, formal symbols of esteem between equals. So it seems that the epiphany described here by Matthew is one that acknowledges and celebrates multiplicity, not that The New Way has arisen, but that a new way has appeared for the spiritual seekers of the world, one which will take its place alongside other manifestations of the divine in a posture of respectful recognition.

And from this vision of global multiplicity that holds within it all the world, we turn to Jesus’ baptism in the river Jordan by John. From the large and formal to a personal and private act of devotion of one man to one way, one truth, one life. Baptism in Jesus’s day was a Jewish ritual of

purification and renewal. Practiced primarily by itinerant preachers like John the Baptist, the preacher would gather a crowd, much like a 19th century revival meeting, expound to the people about their sins and how they had failed in their religious obligation, and then those who wished would be baptized as a sign of leaving the past behind and making a fresh start in their relationship with God. The baptism of Jesus did not carry with it the kind of once-for-all symbolism of later Christian baptism. Instead, it marked a believer's personal desire to recommit him or herself to a life of faithfulness and devotion to God. Baptism existed outside of the obligatory structure of Jewish piety. It was not an ordinary or necessary action of faith like circumcision or observing the dietary laws. It was purely personal, an individual spiritual re-turning.

In Jesus's case, we know that it was his experience of baptism that focused his sense of whom he was and the ministry he was to undertake. For this reason, baptism changed in the Christian context. It became the formal rite, and later the sacrament, of entry into Christianity—not one choice among many in one's faith life, but The choosing to have one's faith nurtured and disciplined within the Christian context. Baptism is, in the words of our Puritan forebears, "the sign and seal of our belonging to Christ." It is the symbol of our particularity as a faith tradition and commitment.

Universality and particularity. As each one of us struggles to understand the world theologically, we move almost without thinking between these two poles. Last Sunday night, my family had a family dinner party; and, my younger sister, who is a committed and very conservative Christian, remarked in the course of conversation that she could never be close to someone who did not share her baptism, her particular devotion to Christ and to Christian life. All week, I have thought about her statement in light of our two juxtaposed Epiphany stories. I realize that her understanding of the relationship between the universal and particular in faith follows a trajectory which assumes the only way an individual's experience of faith is universalized is on the path of exclusivity. If my belief is good, is true, then to universalize that feeling is to state that for the experience of others to be good and true, it must be substantially the same as mine in form and content. But the story of the kings suggests another path, a path which holds that my particular allegiance to my faith can lead not to an exclusivist ethic, but instead to a posture of inclusivity. Because I know what it is to be animated by, compelled by my spiritual tradition, then I can—in the spirit of the Wise Ones of old—recognize and respect those who are devoted to their tradition, even if it is vastly different from my own. What is universalized here is not any one religious point of view, but a sense of common cause, of being peers with all those who sincerely seek God's guidance and presence in their lives.

I realize that this is complex and maybe more about what goes on in my head than some of you want to know; but the reason it is important to me is that I believe there are many liberal Christians—some of them in this congregation—who fear that it is somehow intrinsic to Christianity to be exclusivist in its faith understanding. And because of that worry, they are unable to celebrate their faith, their baptism, the particularity of the Christianity that fills up their lives. They don't want to be publicly identified as Christian. They cannot whole-heartedly enter into Christian life because, in their minds, to embrace their tradition would be to stand apart from, even reject those of alternate religious understanding. And I think it's important for

us to understand that out of our own texts, our own scripture, it doesn't have to be that way. It can be, instead, that the more we are devoted to our faith, the more we seek and find spiritual maturity, then the more deeply we can appreciate all others of all deep religious tradition who, in their way, by the rubrics of their tradition, seek and find spiritual growth as well. I know that for myself, the more deeply I identify as Christian, the more my faith means to me, the more at one I feel with devout Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Jews. To love our tradition, to fully revel in the particularity of our faith path can be, not a barrier between us and those of other faiths but, in fact, a bridge between us, a point of recognition and mutual respect.

When I think of the baptism of Jesus, I imagine him as a man of mid-life—for thirty in those days was mid-life; I think of him as one who had always been observant, but who, in his contact with John the Baptist, was set on fire with a new passion for his particular faith tradition, a sense of call, a sense of ministry, a sense of absolute devotion. And, in finding that very particular ministry, he fulfilled the vision of the Wise Ones who attended his birth. A new star arose out of Bethlehem, a new light in the darkness; our light which as we follow it, will lead us closer to all that is light, all that is truth, all that is God. Thanks be to God. Amen.