

# Beginning Again

*Baptism of the Lord*

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*Ken Kovacs*

## Scripture

### Genesis 1:1-5

When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

### Mark 1:4-11

so John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

## Sermon

Before the designation of Christmas as December 25, the Nativity of Christ was celebrated on January 6, the Feast of Epiphany. [i] Christ's birthday is his epiphany. From the Greek *epiphaneia*, meaning "manifestation" or "appearance." In Classical Greek, the word was used to describe the appearance of new light at dawn. Paul's uses the word in his epistle to Titus. "The grace of God has appeared (*epephane*) bringing salvation to all, the manifestation (*epiphaneia*) of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (2:11, 13). [ii]

For Eastern Orthodox Christians, Epiphany was and remains the day to celebrate the birth or manifestation of Christ, the incarnation of the Word. The Word was made flesh and "we have seen his glory" (Jn. 1:14). Yesterday, congregations around the world welcomed the birth of God's light into the world with elaborate liturgies, processions, parades, and even a swim—yes,

a swim. Epiphany celebrations always include the blessing of the waters because Epiphany was also closely related to Jesus' baptism. In some churches, Epiphany marked Christ's birth and baptism. [iii]

The way the liturgical calendar falls this year, Epiphany and Baptism of the Lord (today) are symbolically aligned, as they were in the early centuries of the church. And the lectionary, linking Genesis 1 with Mark 1, beautifully highlights the connection between the manifestation of God's breath, God's ruach, which "swept over the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:2), and the manifestation of God's breath breathing through the flesh of Jesus, who entered into the waters of the Jordan to claim the purpose and direction of his life.

Like creation itself, Jesus' birth, his life and ministry signify the start of something new. This "newness" is at the center of Mark's Gospel. Listen to the first sentence: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ" (Mk. 1:1). *Archē tou euaggeliou Iēsou Christou*. Did you hear that? *Arche*. "The beginning." Mark intentionally echoes the opening of Genesis 1, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1).

The Greek version of Genesis, which Mark would have known, reads, "*En archē epoiēsen*." [iv] *Arche*. Beginning. (The root of the word "archaeology.") When God creates, new worlds come into being. God's presence always yields something new. Mark, too, alludes to this newness. We're told that just as Jesus came up out of the water, "he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him" (Mk. 1:10). Heavens tearing apart echoes the prayer of Isaiah, which we heard at the beginning of Advent, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...to make your name known" (Is. 64:1-2). An experience of God's manifestation inevitably entails a new beginning. Just like God's creative act at the beginning of everything, so, too, Mark sees the coming of Christ signifying something new, the beginning of good news.

Christ's epiphany, that is, his appearance signals a shift. A new heaven and a new earth have appeared in him. Theologians call this new thing the *novum*. Christ is a *novum*, a radical breaking into history, not the result of historical or natural development but something other, something new. Christ represents a new order, which means the crumbling and dissolving of the old order. Christ's epiphany breaks into our lives and offers something new, a *novum*. [v] Medieval theologian Meister Eckhart (c.1260-c.1328) said, "Every work of God is new" (*Omne opus dei est novum*). [vi] God is thus ever-creating. Then and now, whenever we encounter Christ, the world is never again the same—it can never be the same. Didn't the Magi return home by a different route after their encounter (Mt. 2:12)? They went home changed. Christ's ministry, his healing touch, his word, his presence, his claim on our lives changes us—again and again—whether in the moment or across the many moments of our lives. And, for Mark, it begins with baptism. Jesus' baptism was real for Jesus. It wasn't fake or feigned. It was more than a rite of passage. In the Jordan, Jesus experienced an epiphany of his own; he was given his own encounter with the Spirit of God, who claimed him and revealed to him his core identity.

And, so we could say, baptism is an epiphany! Epiphanies change us. Baptism changes us. It changed Jesus. It changes us. This is why baptism must never be taken lightly and why we should never take our own baptisms for granted. Here's why.

Albert Camus (1913-1960), the French existentialist, author of *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, a writer often at odds with Christianity, seriously considered getting baptized. In the late 1950s, Camus started attending the American Church in Paris. He went to hear the composer Marcel Dupré (1886-1971) play the organ, only later to listen to the sermon. Camus became good friends with the pastor, the Methodist minister Howard Mumma. One summer afternoon, Camus asked, naively, "Howard, do you perform baptisms?" Shocked, Mumma said, "Yes, Albert, I do." "What is the significance of this rite?" Camus asked Mumma to explain its meaning as a "symbolic commitment to God." Camus confessed that he was "dissatisfied with the whole philosophy of existentialism" and was searching for something. "The reason I have been coming to church," Camus explained, "is because I am seeking. I'm almost on a pilgrimage—seeking something to fill the void that I am experiencing—and no one else knows. Certainly the public and the readers of my novels, while they see that void, are not finding the answers in what they are reading. But deep down you are right—I am searching for something that the world is not giving to me." Mumma said, "Albert, ...I encourage you to keep searching for a meaning and something that will fill the void and transform your life. Then you will arrive in living waters where you will find meaning and purpose." They talked about baptism, being washed clean, forgiveness, being born of the Spirit, and entering a life of pilgrimage. Camus looked at Mumma with tears and said, "I am ready. I want this. This is what I want to commit my life to." Camus wanted to be baptized privately, but Mumma refused because baptism is a sacrament of the whole church. Camus couldn't grasp the importance of making a public commitment. "I cannot belong to any church," he said. Camus continued to read and reflect on the meaning of baptism, but he was never baptized and died not long after this conversation. [vii] What is so remarkable about this account is how Camus, this "atheist," took baptism seriously. He struggled with its meaning, didn't take it for granted, and considered it more than a simple rite of passage.

Where are you on the journey? Where are you on the pilgrimage? How are these living waters forming and reforming you? Where are you being called? What is Christ asking of you? To enter the waters of baptism means that your life is never yours. You have been baptized into the grand drama of God's ongoing transformation of humanity and creation. The Christian journey begins—and begins again and again—in these waters. We are born here. We go down into the Jordan and surface as new people. At the font, we discover who we are and whose we are. Here, we are marked for ministry and given a glimpse of a new future, a new day, God's *novum*. Here, we are called to discipleship, to witness our commitment to God in a public way that makes a difference in the world. And every time we consider our baptism, place our hands in the waters of the font, watch a baptism, every time we see water, whenever we have water wash over us, we have an opportunity to remember who we are and whose we are. And we

have the chance to start again, begin again and again and again—and discover why we were born, discover the mystery of our lives, discover the meaning of our *manifestation* in the world, discover why we have *appeared* in the world, "for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14).

## Sources

- [i] In 361, Bishop Epiphanius of Salamis (d. 403), in Cyprus, referred to January 6 as Christ's "Birthday; that is, His Epiphany."
- [ii] See also 2 Timothy 1:9-10, "This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality through the gospel."
- [iii] There's evidence that in early Gnostic sects, as early as 200, Epiphany was the feast day to honor Jesus' baptism.
- [iv] See Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 121.
- [v] Myers, 131.
- [vi] Cited in Kurt Flasch, *Meister Eckhart: Philosopher of Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 83. On the *novum*, see Jürgen Moltmann's theological classic *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).
- [vii] For a fuller account of their conversation, see "Conversations with Camus," *The Christian Century*, June 7, 2014, 644-647. See also Howard E. Mumma, *Albert Camus and the Minister* (Paraclete Press, 2000).