

Epiphany 1/Baptism of our Lord
January 7, 2018

*CW-S – “God’s Own Child, I Gladly Say It”

**CW-S – “Christ, Your Footprints Through the Desert”

Mark 1:4-11
737*-89-709**/80-299

Epiphanies in the Wilderness

- I. Jesus revealed as the Savior of sinners.
- II. The way to God revealed to sinners.

Dear Christian friends,

As I mentioned at the start of this service we’re now in the Epiphany season. Epiphany is the perfect follow-up to Christmas. The Epiphany Scripture readings REVEAL to us just who this **Baby born** in Bethlehem really is.

Today’s **gospel** reading takes us out into **“the wilderness”** near the Jordan River. This wasn’t a desert with one **rolling sand dune** after another. This was more a BARREN WASTELAND. **Some might call** it a “GOD-FORSAKEN” area - yet it was anything but that! We have some BEAUTIFUL, PRECIOUS epiphanies out in this **“wilderness”** so let’s take a look at them. OUT IN this **“wilderness”** we have 1) Jesus revealed as **the Savior** of sinners and 2) the way to God revealed to sinners.

I. Jesus revealed as the Savior of sinners.

Christmas was just two weeks ago but these verses take us WAY BEYOND that. Jesus was now about 30 years old. EXCEPT for the presentation of the baby Jesus **in the temple** – the coming of the **wise men** and the flight into Egypt- and the 12-year-old Jesus in the temple – NOTHING is known about those thirty years. Evidently Jesus worked with Joseph in his **carpentry business**. But NOW all that was about to change. JESUS was about to begin His **“public ministry”** – being OUT IN PUBLIC preaching, teaching, etc. **“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.”**

John the Baptist had been QUITE BUSY. He had made quite the stir. **“The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him.”** Even the chief priests, the **Pharisees** and **King Herod** were INTRIGUED by John. **Some** were even wondering if John himself might be the promised Savior. But John QUICKLY SHOT that down. **“One more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of His sandals! I baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”**

Those words are a beautiful epiphany or revelation of JUST WHO our Savior is. He is **“more powerful”** than John. John was a “GREAT” person. Jesus Himself said that John was **“more than a prophet”** and that **“among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.”** But as great as John was Jesus is SO MUCH THE GREATER. Compared to Jesus John said he wasn’t even **“worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of His sandals!”** Now that was the job of the LOWEST slave for **obvious reasons**. BASICALLY John was telling them, **“You think I’m such BIG STUFF – you think I’m SO IMPORTANT – I’m nothing compared to the One who’s coming!”** **“I baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”**

With those words John wasn’t PUTTING DOWN the importance or blessings of his baptism. But John was making an important distinction and **contrast** between himself and Jesus. John baptized **“with water.”** That’s what God had told him to do. What made John’s baptism SO PRECIOUS and **special** was nothing John did but GOD AT WORK through it. John was just an instrument in God’s hands. **Jesus**, however, is able to do MUCH MORE than John. Jesus is able to give **“the Holy Spirit”** to people – BY HIS OWN **authority**. In a STRIKING WAY John was revealing – **making an epiphany** – that Jesus is **“more powerful”** and **greater** than John BECAUSE Jesus is God Himself.

Now we have another beautiful epiphany or REVELATION about Jesus – the ALL-POWERFUL Son of God is the Savior of us sinners. ***“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth and was baptized by John in the Jordan.”*** Matthew tells us that John the Baptist almost “HAD A FIT” about this. Jesus didn’t need to be baptized – especially with ***“a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”*** Jesus was sinless. Jesus had no sins to confess – He didn’t need anyone’s forgiveness. When you’re perfect in every way – when you’ve lived a life perfect in every way – you DON’T NEED ANY **confession – repentance – forgiveness – baptism**. That was just the case with Jesus. ***“I need to be baptized by You,”*** John told Jesus, ***“and do You come to me?”***

Yes, Jesus had come to be baptized by John with ***“a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”*** **Why?** **Because** the sinless Son of God had come to be the Savior of a world of sinners. **To be** our Savior by being our SUBSTITUTE. God’s Son was born one of us to TAKE THE PLACE of all of us. Jesus had us STEP ASIDE and He STEPPED IN and took our place **under God’s law**. Jesus traded places with us and lived that life of **perfect love** and **obedience** that WE OWED God but never could live. Jesus took our place on the cross – suffered the hell we had coming – died the death we deserved because of our sins. Jesus did all that for us so that we could NOW HAVE and BE SURE of God’s forgiveness of all our sins and eternal life in heaven when we die.

“Just as Jesus came up out of the water, He saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove. A voice came from heaven: ‘You are My Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with You.’” Another beautiful epiphany out here ***“in the wilderness”*** – an EPIPHANY or REVELATION of our triune God. The FATHER who in love gave us His Son as our Savior and who here puts His STAMP OF APPROVAL on all Jesus has done for us. **Jesus**, the SON of God born one of us, our **Savior**. The HOLY SPIRIT descending on Jesus and remaining with Him.

“You are My Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with You.” Aren’t those beautiful, precious words? Words of love – **praise** – acceptance – **commendation**. Wouldn’t it BE GREAT if **God** could say the same about us? HE DOES as we come to Him THROUGH Jesus. Out here ***“in the wilderness”*** we also have...

II. The way to God revealed to sinners.

God had sent John to prepare people to **welcome** their coming Savior. ***“John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance.”*** The word for ***“preach”*** literally means to HERALD or PROCLAIM. A preacher is simply to proclaim what he’s **been told** to say. The preacher dare not make up his message. He dare not preach his own PERSONAL OPINIONS or **ideas**. The preacher dare not tamper with the message – change it in any way – to KEEP PEOPLE HAPPY or not offend anyone. GOD determines what is to be preached – not the preacher or the **people**.

So John ***“preached.”*** He preached not just with words but BY EXAMPLE as well. ***“John was clothed in camel’s hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey.”*** John’s LIFESTYLE was a call for people to get their priorities in life straight. John’s example echoed Jesus’ words, ***“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed! A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”*** Working out there ***“in the wilderness”*** John was also letting people know that GOD WILL BE FOUND on God’s terms and where God wants to be found.

With words and actions John called on people to repent and confess their sins. To ***“repent”*** is literally to CHANGE ONE’S MIND or thinking. To **change one’s thinking** about sin – about oneself – about God. **Sin** is not something to JOKE about or JUST SHRUG off. God was meant business when He gave us His commandments. Ignoring what God says – defying **God’s will** for our lives – can never be taken as NO BIG DEAL or brushed off with an EVERYBODY ELSE is doing it. God takes our sins PERSONALLY and SERIOUSLY. Sin is deadly – destructive – **damning**.

The WAY TO GOD calls for confessing sin. Confession is dropping the **excuses** - taking responsibility for what we've done and - facing up to the **hell we deserve** because of our sins. ***"As they confessed THEIR sin,"*** Mark wrote. Confession is admitting that I HAVE so sinned and **defied** my Creator - God should really send ME to hell's **eternal banishment** and punishment.

And yet confession dare not stop with JUST ADMITTING our sins. Recall how Luther explained confession in the catechism. "Confession has two parts - the ONE that we confess our sins and the OTHER that we receive absolution or **forgiveness** for our sins." ***"John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."***

Out here "in the wilderness" we have an epiphany - the WAY TO GOD is revealed to us sinners. The WAY of forgiveness and faith. We HAVE JESUS. We have His perfect life CREDITED to us. We have His death on the cross as the FULL PAYMENT for **all** our sins. We have Jesus' resurrection from the dead - His TRIUMPH over death and the grave - the GUARANTEE of **our resurrections** on the Last Day. Trusting in Jesus and all He's **done** for us WE HAVE God's forgiveness full and free - we have a whole new relationship with God - we are going straight to heaven when we die.

ALL those blessings God gave us THROUGH Holy Baptism. Our baptism is ESSENTIALLY the same as John's - ***"a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."*** What a beautiful epiphany we have here ABOUT BAPTISM. Baptism is "not just plain water but water USED at God's command and CONNECTED with God's Word." **In Baptism God is at work** THROUGH His Word cleansing us of all our sins - clothing us with Jesus' perfect life - working faith in our hearts - adopting us as His children - promising us eternal life in heaven. "HOW CAN WATER do **such great things**? It is not the water that does such things but GOD'S WORD which is in and with the water and faith which trusts this Word of God.

"John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness." A strange place to be sure. But then God does some STRANGE things. Who WOULD HAVE THOUGHT that God's own Son would come here to be our Savior? Who **would have thought** that God would fully and freely forgive all our sins for Jesus' sake? Who **would have thought** that Baptism is such a WONDERFUL - POWERFUL - PRECIOUS **work of God**? That's why epiphanies are SO IMPORTANT. That's why God gave us these epiphanies ***"in the wilderness."*** Amen.

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