

II EPIPHANY 2014
SERMON - CHRIST CHURCH PARISH
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Why did Jesus get baptized? As with everything Jesus does--his baptism was not for his own sake---it was for ours.

The epiphany---the striking appearance---in the Gospel is in what the baptism of Jesus teaches us and in what it accomplished for us. John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the Messiah and God himself calls Jesus his own dear Son whom he loves. Jesus did not become the Messiah and God's Son at his baptism...but the truth about who he is was confirmed publicly for the first time.

Saint Mark begins his Gospel by telling us he has Good News to share with us about Jesus. We see the adult Jesus coming to his cousin John the Baptist and asking to be baptized. John was the forerunner, the one who came before Jesus, and fulfilled the prophecies from Malachi that God would send his messenger ahead of the Messiah to open the way before him, and from Isaiah that the road for the Lord should be made ready and the path straight for him to travel.

John the Baptist was an itinerant preacher who had attracted a large following of his own. People came to hear his message about getting their lives in order by turning away from their bad behavior and turning back to God. He told people to confess their sins to God and then get baptized by water to show they were serious about changing their lives.

But John said he was not the one they should really be looking for; someone greater than he was coming; someone so great, John said he wasn't even good enough to untie his shoes. And when he came, his baptism would be better than his own, because he would baptize not just with water, but with water and the Holy Spirit.

John knew the limitations of his own baptism. He knew that the public showing of repentance and a ritual washing away of sin by the people who were following him and listening to him was fine for the moment. They accomplished their intended purpose, which was a temporary reprieve. More had to be done if people's sins were to be truly forgiven and they were to be put right with God once and for all.

When Jesus came to John and asked him to baptize him, John reacts negatively to the request. John told Jesus he was the one who should get baptized and not Jesus. But Jesus told John this was all part of God's plan and to go ahead and baptize him just as he asked. Mark tells us that as Jesus came up out of the water, the Holy Spirit came down on him like a dove and God the Father called Jesus his own dear Son, whom he loved.

Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity and made of the same stuff God the Father is made of and he cannot sin. He did not have to get baptized. But as in everything Jesus does, he was baptized for us. His baptism by water and the Holy Spirit was a pivotal moment in his life. Jesus the adult was now ready to take on the work he told Mary and Joseph he must do when they found Jesus the adolescent boy teaching the teachers in the Temple.

Jesus' baptism by water and the Holy Spirit also sets the pattern for our own baptisms by water and the Holy Spirit. Saint Paul tells us in his Letter to the Philippians that Jesus humbled himself to become like us. The entire life of Jesus was a great epiphany---a striking appearance---of who he was. We see this in his teaching. But mostly we see this in his actions. Humility defines the life of Jesus and it is his humility we try to emulate in our own lives.

Our own baptisms by water and the Holy Spirit are equally pivotal moments in our own lives. In baptism our sins are forgiven and our lives are forever changed. We become full members of the Church---the Body of Christ. During the Mass we pray that God will bless us so that--we may be made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him.

The affect of our baptisms is permanent. Our sins are forgiven and we have the gift of the Holy Spirit to guide and strengthen us in the work we do. But baptism does not negate our free will. We can choose to do what is right; we can also choose to do what is wrong. The choice is ultimately up to us. We can be certain God will give us all the help we need to make the right choices. We just have to show we are serious and ask for his help.

It was for our sake Jesus got baptized. Let's ask ourselves again. What sort of epiphanies--what sort of striking appearances---do we want to be for Jesus?

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