

THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER

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BELOVED

It's better than being better

by Drew Downs

As the calendar turns to a new year, we often feel compelled to *start something new*. The phrase "new year" is synonymous with resolutions. And what is a resolution, but the desire to become better than we are.

This, of course, is not just the impulse of the moment, but of the gospel. And there are few things more universal than the expectation that going to church will make us better people.

In the story about Jesus's baptism, we hear the voice of God call Jesus "the Beloved." A word that contrasts strikingly with our own words for him: king, savior, Lord.

Being beloved isn't *better*. It isn't part of a track toward empowerment or personal growth. Nor is it part of evaluation culture. It is simply about love. Specifically *being loved* by someone who chooses to love. Just like we are called to do. To love each other.

AFTER THE EPIPHANY

2023

WHAT'S GOING ON

*"You know we've got to find a way
To bring some loving here today".*

-Marvin Gaye

Disciples, Apostles, and Saints!

Epiphany

Centuries before we celebrated Christmas, the earliest Christians developed a different feast in midwinter. The feast we know as the Epiphany was one of the earliest feasts. And along with Easter and Pentecost, formed a trio of essential worship for the early church.

The original context for the Epiphany was the Baptism of Jesus. But as it gained prominence in the West, Roman Catholics pinned it instead to the coming of the Wisemen, as described in the Gospel of Matthew. Our current practice in The Episcopal Church is (unsurprisingly) to have it both ways. We celebrate the Epiphany on the day (January 6) and read about the wisemen. Then on the very next Sunday, we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord.

So what then is the Epiphany about? The two gospel stories draw us in slightly different directions: one to the establishment of Jesus's ministry and the other to the expansiveness of Jesus's reign. But the *spirit* of the season is something *bigger*.

In the Epiphany, we are drawn into the *revealing* character of Jesus's ministry. As in what God is revealing through Jesus. What Jesus reveals about God. How the whole project is *showing us something*. And in the end, how we then are invited into all of it.

As we move from this season of giving and move into this season of revealing, may we *find* our place in this project, *receive* the spirit's invitation with grace, and *offer* to others an opportunity to find the Christ revealed through us.

With love,
Drew

AFTER THE EPIPHANY

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FOR SUNDAY

The First Sunday After the Epiphany

January 8, 2023

Collect

Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting.

Amen.

Reading

From Luke 2:15-21

"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."

Reflection

The Spirit descends like a dove and alights on him.

Generations have found kinship to Jesus through baptism. That we are baptized in faith and truth as he was. Even the little tussle in the story between Jesus and John, about who should baptize whom reveals the order of things.

It isn't about who has more power. There isn't a hierarchy. The older one doesn't go first. Nor does the one with the greater standing. John is the baptizer. So he baptizes.

CHRISTMAS

Even Jesus.

This sounds a bit like the saint/sinner paradox. Every saint is also a sinner. And likewise, there is saint in every sinner.

The baptizer must even baptize the Messiah. The one who saves him, he must also save.

There is an internal logic to this, but I think we can appreciate how difficult this is to embody. Because we so often like to defer to those who are "better" than we are. We'll say *No, I'm not the one who is supposed to do this. You are more full of faith than I am!*

Even when we know that's not how it works, we'll cop to that regardless. *Not me! You!*

When the Spirit descends upon Jesus, looking like a dove, it alights on him. Lands upon him. It physically connects with him.

It reminds me of the touch of my parents' hands upon my head, the bishop's at my confirmation, and years later, at my ordination. The feel of this upon me: the weight and the love: both. History, connection, family, church, denominations, all who came before, parents, siblings, saints, sinners, all that is and all that will be, activists, political figures, monastics, healers, prophets, teachers.

All of that weight descending upon me...and yet as light as a feather. The yoke and burden, heavy and light. But most importantly, shared.

The dove, upon the beloved, "This is my son." Pleasing. And so do we, beloved. Arrive, receive, to be loved. Pleasing God.

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