

Preaching From Epiphany Through the Last Sunday After Epiphany

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Epiphany is still a bit strange to Presbyterians. Yet more and more those church traditions which base their life upon the centrality of Scripture look to the liturgical year as a way of ordering worship around major events in the life of our Lord and in the life of God's people. Epiphany has a long and unusual history and probably predates Christmas as a Christian festival. The word itself comes from the Greek, *epanerosen*. In John 2:11 we read "This deed at Canaan-in-Galilee, is the first of the signs by which Jesus *revealed* his glory and led his disciples to believe in him." The festival itself probably began in Egypt as a celebration to displace the pagan festival of the winter solstice which was celebrated on January 6 (December 25 in Rome). This Christian festival was to signify several things, all of which were related to the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The festival referred to his birth, to his baptism, and to his first miracle. Liturgical scholar James F. White has written: "The common theme of all of these events is Jesus Christ manifesting God to humans. Appropriately, the early church often called this day Theophany (manifestation of God) and some Eastern Orthodox churches still do."¹

With the Western church's acceptance of December 25 as the date for the Feast of the Incarnation, Epiphany became associated with the adoration of the Magi. This festival was celebrated whether or not the sixth of January fell on a Sunday. Some have followed the practice of celebrating Epiphany on the Sunday immediately following January 6 (when it happens not to be a Sunday). This year, of course, Epiphany falls on Sunday. By tradition, the Sunday following January 6 has been an occasion to celebrate our Lord's baptism. The second Sunday after Epiphany often focuses upon his first miracle as recorded in John's Gospel. This year there are six Sundays between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday (due to the movable feast of Easter). It has been popular to speak of this time as "the season of Epiphany;" however, recently liturgical theologians have come to speak of this as the Sundays after Epiphany or "Sundays in Ordinary Time."² Regardless of the nomenclature, the theme of this time is the manifestation of Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, beginning with his birth, moving to his baptism, and followed by moments in his Galilean ministry which reveal his power and identity. Recently, Presbyterians have followed the lead of Lutherans and concluded this season with a celebration of the transfiguration, which is not only a fitting conclusion to the epiphanies, but also marks a good transition into Lent and the passion narratives.

Those who follow the common lectionary, which now appears in the program calendar of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), will see how the Gospel lessons follow this traditional pattern for the season. (NOTE: The wedding in

Cana appears in cycle C of the common lectionary on the second Sunday after Epiphany.)

The first decision to be made is whether or not to follow this common lectionary as it has been recently revised, or to develop a lectionary of one's own for this period of time. Recent studies report that better than 55 percent of Presbyterian pastors are using the common lectionary. For that reason let us look at the lectionary passages for the season, before turning to some suggestions for other thematic approaches to this time.

In most cases, all three lessons in the lectionary touch upon some aspect of the manifestation of God. A Psalm is also appointed to provide the congregation an opportunity to sing its own affirmations about God's presence among us. (We need to remember that traditionally the Psalter has been sung by the people as one of their acts of praise rather than used as one of the texts to be read as a scripture lesson. This does not preclude comments on the Psalm in the sermon, and often the Psalm for the day distills the three lessons extremely well.)

Exegetical resources for the lectionary are well known to those who use it, and I will make no attempt to offer that here. However, before one enters into the task of exegesis, it is important to read and listen to the text itself. My own style is to begin with a personal "response" to the text—finding where it strikes me. My conviction is that if it speaks to me in this way, it will probably speak to my people as well. These initial hearings always demand the rigor of exegesis to insure what we are hearing is within the realm of what the author was saying. I trust preachers to do that kind of investigation on their own.

For another look at these texts through the eyes of those planning worship during this season, one should read the section entitled "Practical Aids to Lectionary Use," by Bower, Hopson, and Hair, which appears in the journal *Reformed Liturgy and Music*, 28, no.3 (Summer 1984) (available through the Presbyterian Church, USA, Joint Office of Worship). Not only will one hear Peter Bower's ruminations on the lessons, but preachers, musicians, and other worship planners will also find valuable suggestions for hymns, anthems, and Psalm settings which will compliment the texts and enrich the congregations' worship.

For those who do not use the lectionary, but nonetheless use the Christian year as a way to order their preaching themes, the one central to this season is God's manifestation to the world. It can be approached in several different ways. First of all, it will be possible to choose only one of the lection texts (Old Testament or gospel lesson) and then select other biblical texts which help interpret the main lesson for the day. Doing this, a series of themes emerge:

EPIPHANY: The gospel is for all people, Gentiles as well as Jews. (Here it is the Old Testament and epistle lessons which bear the theme.)

BAPTISM OF THE LORD: Jesus' baptism is a witness to who he is, and distinction is drawn between Christian baptism and the baptism of John (Acts lesson). This is an excellent opportunity to do a little sacramental education in the congregation, especially given the pervasiveness of ana-baptist baptismal theology lurking around local churches.

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY: John's witness to Jesus as the

“one who is to come” and the lamb of God calls for our own personal response.

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY: God’s call to repentance is also a call to discipleship.

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY: The power and authority of God is demonstrated in the teachings of Jesus.

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY: The power and authority of Jesus is demonstrated in Jesus’ acts of healing.

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY: Jesus is transfigured, becoming transparent to his closest followers. This is not so much for the sake of their own faith, but in service to the ministry they have been called to fulfill. So too for us.

One final word about the use of all these texts on a particular Sunday: in most cases, all three lessons touch upon some aspect of the manifestation of God in Jesus Christ. However, preachers should exercise care to deal with one text *thoroughly* rather than skipping lightly over three themes (much less three points!). It is one thing to interpret Scripture in light of Scripture and see its total unity. It is another to play hopscotch between three lessons. In some cases—notably the epistle lessons—there may not be a correlation between the texts. If one is not obvious, do not force one upon the lections.

Preachers who like to offer a sermon series might want to use this time to preach on the signs of God’s presence with the covenant community. This can include major texts beginning with the call of Abraham, events in the lives of the patriarchs, the call of Moses (including God’s continuing interventions in plagues, exodus, quail and manna, water in the desert, etc.), the call of Jeremiah; the list is almost endless, and we have yet to leave the Old Testament. The prophets are abundant with graphic texts and images which witness to the presence of God with the covenant people. The book of Acts is also a rich resource for such texts.

The Gospel of John is a goldmine for those interested in a series of sermons as well. Pastor and New Testament scholar Thomas W. Gillespie has suggested preaching through the signs of the presence of God as they are presented in John’s gospel (John 1:19-12:50 is the Book of Signs). Epiphany Sunday could focus upon the prologue of John’s Gospel and the affirmation of God’s manifest presence among us. The following Sunday could pick up the traditional baptismal theme (John 1:24-28), followed the next week by the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-12). On the third Sunday after Epiphany, the narrative about Jesus healing the gentile official’s son at Cana might be used (John 4:46-54). On the fourth Sunday after Epiphany, the healing of the paralytic at Bethesda (John 5:1-15) or the blind man in Jerusalem (John 9:1-41) is appropriate. The fifth Sunday after Epiphany might focus upon the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (John 6:1-15) with the sixth Sunday after Epiphany ordered around Jesus walking on the sea of Galilee (John 6:16-21). As by tradition the last Sunday of Epiphany is that of transfigured glory, the raising of Lazarus is appropriate (John 11:1-44). Now that is a transfiguration of a kind that even you and I can expect, was well as a suitable transition into the season of Lent.

Yet another way that John's Gospel could be the source of a series during this time would be to focus upon the "I am" sayings of Jesus. Raymond Brown makes a distinction between these sayings and preachers will want to read what Brown has to say.⁴ He finds three different kinds of "I am" saying. First there are those used in an absolute sense: John 8:24, 28, 58 and 13:19. Next, there are those where a predicate is understood, but not directly expressed: John 6:20 and 18:5. Finally, there are those which include a predicate nominative: John 6:35, 52, "I am the Bread of Life"; 8:12 (9:5), "I am the Light of the World"; 10:7,9, "I am the sheepgate"; 10:11,13, "I am the Good Shepherd"; 11:25, "I am the Resurrection and the Life"; 14:6, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life"; and 15:1-5, "I am the vine." These last seven lessons fall into a natural order which could be used beginning on Epiphany and ending on the last Sunday after Epiphany. If this were the case, certainly the Exodus 3:14 passage would be used to introduce the series and set the context.

It is not accident that the festival of Epiphany emerged within the fourth century of the church's life, for this was the time of the great christological controversies and subsequent doctrinal formation. One can use this season after Epiphany to deal with the great christological passages of Scripture. Here we can sound the bold, hymnic affirmations of the church, replete with their conviction that God is present with us in human flesh in Jesus Christ, and the triumphal hope we receive because of that reality. Such preaching will be a good preparation for subsequent lenten preaching, when the theme of Jesus' humiliation, servanthood, disciplined obedience, and unwavering trust in God will of necessity lead us to the cross. The Epiphany day text could be John 1:1-14. Any of the baptismal texts in the Gospels would be suitable for the following Sunday. Then, on the second through the last Sunday after Epiphany, texts such as Philippians 2:5-11, Colossians 1:15-20, Romans 5:12-21 (or 6:4-14), Ephesians 1:3-14, and Galatians 4:4 can be used. This series might conclude with a sermon on the christological affirmations of the book of Hebrews (2:17, 4:15, 5:8-10, 9:23-28 and 13:20). This would give people a broader vision of the biblical sources of our doctrinal affirmation when speaking of the mystery of the incarnation and its purpose and claim upon us. At the same time, the christological references of the Old Testament should be used as a cross reference to the main text: Judges 8:22f; 1 Samuel 8:7, 12:3; Isaiah 45:1; Ezekiel 2:1; Daniel 7:13; Micah 5:2; and Zechariah 3.

Epiphany celebrates God's self-revelation to us in Jesus Christ—that light which shines in the darkness—a light which no darkness can overcome. Yet we are called not only to live in that light, but to proclaim it. Our task is only half complete if our people only hear the message as personal comfort and hope. Until our preaching causes them to preach, we have not caught the message of Epiphany.

NOTES

¹ White, James F., *Introduction to Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 56.

Those interested in following the history of the development of Epiphany as it was split out of an Epiphany/Nativity festival, and the two divided between January 6 and December 25, may do so by reading White, 55-65, or one of the following:

McArthur, A.A., "Epiphany," in *Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. J.G. Davies (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 170f.

Cobb, Peter G., "The History of the Christian Year," in *The Study of the Liturgy*, ed. Jones, Wainwright, and Yarnold (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 414ff.

Daniels, Harold M., "Recent Changes in the Presbyterian Celebration of the Liturgical Year," *Reformed Liturgy and Music* 26 (Fall, 1982): 153-58.

² The rather complicated issue of how the church year is being spoken of in identifying particular Sundays may be sorted out by reading both White and Erickson, Craig D., "Reformed Faith and Worship," *Reformed Liturgy and Music* 108 (Spring, 1984): 72f.

³ Cobb, "Christian Year," 141.

⁴ Brown, Raymond E., *The Gospel According to John*, 12 vols. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1966), 533-38.