

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. **How do you decide what is for you, and what is for other people to know?** What information is private or simply for you and someone you share intimacy with, and what information is available for others to know?
1. I think this question has taken on **new resonance in our Social Media Era**, because there's a **wider platform for knowing and being known**. You might say there are concentric circles of intimacy. There's yourself. The maybe next out is potentially if you have a significant other, a partner, lover.
 2. Broader family may be the next tier or two out.
 3. Then maybe your immediate communities, your church folks, the people you work with.
 4. But it keeps going out. Thanks to Facebook and Instagram, there are all kinds of people at all levels of intimacy you are connected with. People you've just met. People you haven't seen in twenty years. The cousin who drives you crazy in person but shares cute pictures of her kids. They're all there. How do you decide what to share with whom? **When do you make something - a pregnancy, a new job, a new relationship "Facebook official"?** Often by the time people have updated their relationship status on Facebook, there's already been a dance. The relationship has gone far enough in the intimate circles to be something worthy of announcing more widely. What precipitates for you the moment of unveiling to someone something true of yourself at any of those concentric circles? Which ones do you find harder or easier to reveal to?
- B. **I start with these questions about revealing information because I think they're actually connected to what we're considering from a faith perspective these first couple of weeks of January.** Today is the Second Sunday where we are starting off the New Year focusing on stories of Epiphany, or manifestation or appearance. Last week we looked at the story that Christians in the West often consider - the arrival of the Magi. This Sunday we're considering the tradition of the Eastern church.
1. Little background in case you aren't aware of what I mean by West vs. East. This has its origins in split that happened in the Christian church almost 1000 years ago. Resulted in Roman Catholic church (the West) and Eastern Orthodox church (the East). Eventually the West would split more and give rise to Protestantism 500 years later. So many of our traditions are informed more by that wing. But the Eastern church is out there too, and very important for many, including many Christians who are Eastern Orthodox in the United States.
 2. In the Eastern church, the Epiphany story that's focused on is a different epiphany. Some call it the Theophany - specifically an appearance/manifestation of God. This is the story we're going to look at today. The story of Jesus' baptism.
- II. First, before baptism itself, there's the Setup:
- A. First, the setup. John the Baptizer, is this ascetic with interesting clothing and diet, preaching in the desert. And people are drawn to him. Matthew says it like this: **"4 Now John wore clothing made from camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his diet consisted of locusts and wild honey. 5 Then people from Jerusalem, as well as all Judea and all the region around the Jordan, were going out to him, 6 and he was baptizing them in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins."**
- B. So why exactly are these folks coming to take a dip in the Jordan? What is the baptism about?
- C. Many Christians don't realize that **what John was doing was not a new thing**. It was **deeply rooted in Ancient Jewish practice**. Since the time of Moses, observant Jews were

encouraged at certain times to immerse themselves in either a natural pool of water or a pool for ritual purification called a *mikveh*. Many Jews, particularly Orthodox Jews, still regularly use them as part of their spiritual life.

- D. There were various times this ritual purification was undertaken. **When converting to Judaism, converts would be cleansed in a *mikveh*.** Often right before marriage a bride and groom would be immersed in a *mikveh*. Priests before they offer sacrifices. Women went through the *mikveh* after having their period or having a baby. It was a way to submit oneself to God for cleansing and purification, a sort of rebirth as one entered the waters similar to the waters of the womb and emerged out fresh.
- E. So John was doing something historic, but he himself also saw it as pointing towards something new. (11 ***“I baptize you with water, for repentance, but the one coming after me is more powerful than I am—I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”*** he says) He is calling people back to this ancient form of purification, of making oneself ready for God by immersing themselves in water, but he’s also recognizing that something more profound is coming. Something that is much more powerful. And that’s the immediate set-up for the Epiphany story.

III. The Story:

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John to be baptized by him in the Jordan River. 14 But John tried to prevent him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?” 15 So Jesus replied to him, “Let it happen now, for it is right for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John yielded to him. 16 After Jesus was baptized, just as he was coming up out of the water, the heavens opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, “This is my one dear Son; in him I take great delight.”

- A. So here we have this famous story. A story that’s told in some fashion in three of the four Gospels, and always in some way as a launching point for the bigger story that’s being told. The context of this story is that it’s kind of the official entry point into the most significant portion of Jesus’ life, at least according to the gospel writers. **Jesus is baptized, then he heads into the wilderness to be tempted for 40 days, and then he emerges and begins actively ministering** to people, performing miraculous healings, preaching truth, training disciples, and so on. This story is the moment that kicks it all off. It’s the Epiphany from which everything else emerges.
- B. **But who was this epiphany for and what did it mean?** And how might reflecting on it anew influence our own understanding of this event as well as our own perception of God’s appearance today?
 - 1. One thing Christians have often pointed out about this story is that it’s one that **clearly illustrates the three persons of the Trinity**. You have the picture of all three working in harmony - the Father blessing the Son and the Spirit alighting on him like a dove. It’s a very cool moment that helps illustrate the community within God to the world. **It’s like God is putting God’s relationship status on display**. God is saying, “We are a thing”. **God has decided in some way to announce something about God’s self that God has known for a long time. And yet this is the moment that relationship status is made public.** This is the moment of Theophany. Why now? Why this way?
- C. **An interesting little point we might miss comes right at the beginning** with this little detail. **“Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan.”** Now if you don’t know anything about the geography and social dynamics of Israel at the time, that’s pretty meaningless, but for Matthew’s readers and the audience at the event, this is an important detail.

1. The Jordan stretched from Galilee to Judea, but sounds like we are in or near Judea. (show map.) All the folks who've come out thus far are from Judea. John's just been addressing, pretty harshly, the religious leaders from Jerusalem that have come to hear him preach. **He's been speaking to folks who hold cultural power.** He's been speaking to the Urban elites. He's been pointing them to someone who is coming with even more power than him. And then in walks Jesus from Galilee, the place that's socially inferior, at least to those from Judea.
 - a) *Galilee is rural, Judea is more urban*
 - b) *Galilee is under a different governor (what the colors here represent). Separate states in a sense.*
 - c) *Galileans talk funny. They have an accent the Judean's looked down upon.*
 - d) *Religious folks thought Galileans were too lax in their practices.*
 - e) *There was racial tension between Jews in Judea and Jews in Galilee because Galilee was more racially mixed, not purely Jewish.*
 2. **So after John's been preaching to the Judean folks about how someone is coming that is puts him to shame, Jesus walks in.** And he's not one of their own. He's from (ugh) Galilee.
- D. The story goes on. Matthew is the one Gospel writer to tell us not just of the event but of an exchange that takes place between John and Jesus first. So let's look at that:
1. First, **John's reaction to Jesus.** John tries to stop him from coming in the water. Vs. 14. "I need to be baptized by you." What is that about?
 - a) John and Jesus don't really seem to know each other before this event. John's been preaching in the Judean wilderness; Jesus has been quietly living as a carpenter in Galilee. But John recognizes him when Jesus arrives as the one he has been preparing the way for. So how much does he understand about who Jesus is? At the start of this story, is he aware of the particular relationship status Jesus has with the Divine?
 - (1) **I don't think so.** John likely felt he was called to prepare the way for the Messiah. That term means "Anointed One" and was generally used to speak of Kings. The implication is that the Messiah to come will be an earthly political leader. There was never any explicit teaching that he would be God in the flesh. He also may have seen Jesus as being a prophet, a spiritual leader, as well as political, but that is still different than the Son of God.
 - b) **So John probably didn't yet get exactly what Jesus' connection to God exactly was, but he did seem to sense that Jesus was not actually in need of what John has to offer.** John is offering a baptism of repentance. And, as far as John can tell, Jesus doesn't need to repent.
 - (1) Here at Haven we like to talk about the endeavor of pursuing faith in God as a journey, and our community is a gathering of folks trying to center around that focal point of God. It's a model called centered set, that focuses not on joining some particular group or other (bounded set), but rather taking a journey of orientation that naturally brings you in contact with others on the same journey. But it's about trajectory. Trying to move towards God, and where we get off course, trying to recalibrate so that we can better move toward that center.
 - (2) This model helpfully illustrates what repentance is talking about, it is the act of turning. **Repentance literally means "to turn again". To recalibrate.** And this makes sense because it is often understood as a reaction to sin, which literally in Greek means "missing the mark". It doesn't mean "breaking the rules" or "doing bad stuff". It means "missing the mark". Both sin and repentance are directional

terms. The way of God is this way, but you are headed that way. So you need to turn and head in that other direction. For John, Baptism was an outer sign and step in the process of recalibrating, turning again to center on God.

(3) But John senses Jesus is right on target. He's the one who doesn't need to recalibrate. He is said to be "without sin". Means he doesn't "miss the mark". He's already rightly oriented and his actions show that. He objects to baptizing Jesus. If anyone needs to recalibrate, John thinks, it's probably him. *I could probably use your help, Jesus.*

E. This brings us to Jesus' response. "Let it happen now, for it is right for us to fulfill all righteousness."

1. These are first words of Jesus that Matthew reports in his Gospel. That seems important. But these words are a little cryptic. What do they mean?

- a) First, we get the sense that **Jesus is framing this little moment in the context of a bigger story.** For Jesus, it's not about does John offer him something he can't do for himself. It's not about does his arrow need to be repointed. That's not why he's come. He's come to do something with bigger implications, something to "fulfill all righteousness".
- b) That phrase "**fulfill all righteousness**" - complicated to perfectly translate in this context, but can probably best be understood to be **acting "in a way that God would deem just, and good."** Righteousness is a kind of **faithfulness both internal and external to the desires of the Divine.** Jesus senses this moment is important to fulfill God's purposes.
- c) And it's **not something Jesus is meant to do alone. Jesus shows is here that his work is collaborative.** Jesus says it's "right for us" to do this, they need each other; to work together.
 - (1)** What is supposed to happen here requires their relational connection. It requires mutual submission.
 - (a)** For John, he is to submit to something he doesn't fully understand. God has given him a role to play, even if he can't fully understand what it means.
 - (b)** For Jesus, this is part of his **full identification with humanity.** He is to work with humans, live fully as human, embody all that it means to be human. For him to redeem humanity he must climb it fully for himself. And this means fully entering in and submitting to John through a human baptism.
 - d) Jesus work' affirms the sacredness of humanity, and indeed all of creation.**
 - (1)** In baptism he takes on this act which itself is rooted in human experience. **To immerse oneself in water, one of the most elemental parts of the created world to connect with and submit to the creator, is a human experience.** The creation brings forth its flawed nature with a desire to be purified and connected to creator. And here Jesus is saying *"I am walking with all humans who long to reconnect with their creator. I am stepping into the waters of longing for renewal with them. I am seeking communion with the Creator in creation just as the brothers and sisters I will give myself for are doing."*
 - (2)** This is what Jesus is doing to fulfill all righteousness. Jesus believes that his public identification with humanity and his submission in this moment to the work of John is being faithful to God's purposes.

F. God Apparently Agrees. The Relationship Status is Made Public. Epiphany Happens.

1. Sometimes the work of the divine is subtle. Not here. This is one of those “**ahhhh**” moments where the clouds part, God’s Spirit shows up in some sort of physical form, and there’s a booming voice from heaven. It’s as far from subtle as you can be.
 2. This seems to be the **ultimate stamp of approval on what’s happening here at this collaborative baptism**. If this experience were just about Jesus getting what he needs in terms of the Holy Spirit to do ministry with, it could have happened anywhere in any context. Just him and God praying. But **this** is the moment, in this context. Perhaps because:
 - a) ***Gives affirmation and authority to work John has been doing.***
 - b) ***It reveals Jesus’ true identity as the Anointed One to folks like John - not anointed with oil to be King, but anointed with God’s Spirit in the form of dove.***
 - c) ***Speaks affirmation and approval to both of them. They taste the fruit of their collaborative effort. Fully receive it.***
 3. But this moment isn’t just for the two of them. It’s a public place. presumably there were others gathered by the sea that day. Matthew tells us folks were coming from far and wide to John. And its recounted by the gospel writers for folks like us. **This is a revealing of Jesus’ character to the world. It’s a setup for all to come.**
- IV. Poet and woman of wisdom **Maya Angelou** is credited with a quote that has been getting a fair amount of play in the media this week, and rightly so.
- A. ‘When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time.’**
1. This of course is resonant in the wake of abhorrent comments made this week by our President, comments so vile that media outlets have had to struggle whether to report or censor the President of the United States.
 2. **Yet as many of us hear that the President referred to nations on the African continent as well as Haiti as “shithole” nations, we weren’t surprised.** This wasn’t a new revelation. The President of the United States has been showing us who he is for a long time. He’s been showing us since he questioned the legitimacy of his predecessor demanding to see his Birth Certificate, implying because he’s black he’s not really qualified to be President. He’s shown us since he declared his candidacy and in the same speech called Mexican immigrants rapists and murderers. Or since he claimed in the wake of white supremacists wreaking terror and death through Charlottesville, that there was blame to be had on “both sides” of the events there. Or since he called NFL Protesters “Sons of Bitches”. This is nothing new. If anyone is shocked by what was reported this week, it’s only because they haven’t been align attention. The manifestation of the heart of our president happened long ago, for as Jesus himself said in **Luke 6, “it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks”**.
- B. The epiphany of Jesus paints a vastly different picture then the epiphany of Donald Trump.**
1. Jesus comes to the river having been born and raised in a place that is the “shithole” of Israel. When his ministry begins people look askance at him. “Jesus is from Nazareth? From Galilee?” they say. “Can anything good come from there?”
 2. But for Jesus, there are no places that are just “shitholes”. There are no places too disgusting to inhabit. He has left the perfect dimension of heavenly presence to inhabit creation. And he chose even to inhabit a place despised by many of his day to demonstrate the flaw in human bias.
 3. **Jesus identifies with humanity to remind us that humanity is sacred.** That *all* of us have been created in the image of God. That all of creation is sacred and beautiful.

Creation is pained and in need of healing, but it is being renewed and redeemed. When Jesus walks into the river, he's not disgusted by its dirt. He's not uncomfortable getting wet, or embarrassed to submit to someone less pure than him. He comes fully embracing creation. Fully participating cooperatively with humans. Fully embodying humanity.

4. **For Eastern Christians who observe this story as the moment of Epiphany, this experience of Jesus entering the water sanctifies the very water of the Jordan itself, and for them, that connects with all the water that is core to life on earth.** When we are birthed, we come with water. Our life is sustained by water. Without it we perish. As some Christians see it, this water that gives and sustains life **is blessed by God**, affirmed, made holy - as the theophany takes place, and the Spirit of God alights on the Son of God in the Jordan. The creator stands with the created in creation.
 - a) **And so Christians, like Jesus, choose to be baptized.** In the early church, the baptismal pools were shaped like crosses, because Christians understood their baptism to be a surrender of life and a resurrection to new life, similar to the work of Jesus death and resurrection. I go under the water and I die. I am surrendered to Jesus. I rise reborn: a new creation, cleansed by Holy Water, anointed by the same Spirit that anointed Jesus.
 - b) The sacredness of the water, and what it affirms of all creation is so important to Eastern Christians that at their Epiphany Service they include an annual ritual: The Blessing of the Waters. The priest prays over a body of water, blesses it with God's presence and Spirit, just as they see Jesus blessing the water of the Jordan, and people take a vial home to use to anoint their home, their friends, places they seek God's blessing.
 - c) In other places, they dive into bodies of water that have been blessed. Sometimes the priest will submerge a cross in the water, reenacting Jesus' entry at his baptism and many Eastern Orthodox Christians will dive to retrieve the cross and experience special blessing, or take a dip in ice holes freezing water, sometimes shaped like a cross, to reconnect with their baptism and the God who affirms creation.
5. As they do this, they are remembering that Jesus sees their humanity is sacred. Jesus values the created world. Jesus wants to cooperate with the daily work of humans to fulfill the bigger purposes God has for creation. Jesus wants to share with all his connection to the divine, and the divine's heart for humanity. They remember that one day on the banks of the Jordan River, **Jesus showed them who they are and they believed it.**

Transition to reflection and conversation -

- 1. What has baptism meant for you in your life? How does reflecting on Jesus' baptism impact your own experience?**
- 2. Where have you seen Jesus reveal who he is to you? Have you struggled to believe it?**
- 3. What does it mean to you that God chooses to bless and inhabit the created world?**