

Baptismal Witness  
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Matthew 2:1-12 Common English Bible (CEB)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. They asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him."

When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:

You, Bethlehem, land of Judah,  
by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah,  
because from you will come one who governs,  
who will shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you've found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him." When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

Acts 10:34-43 Common English Bible (CEB)

Peter said, "I really am learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships [God] and does what is right is acceptable to [God]. This is the message of peace [God] sent to the Israelites by proclaiming the good news through Jesus Christ: [God] is Lord of all! You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism John preached. You know about Jesus of Nazareth, whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and endowed with power. Jesus traveled around doing good and healing everyone oppressed by the devil because God was with him. We are witnesses of everything he did, both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him up on the third day and allowed him to be seen, not by everyone but by us. We are witnesses whom God chose beforehand, who ate and drank with him after God raised him from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

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The passage of time, according to the church calendar at least, can be very disjointed. One moment, it's plodding along at a snail's pace and then all of a sudden, it's a mad dash. Take today for instance.

Today, according to the church calendar, is designated as a celebration of the Baptism of the Lord. According to the church calendar, last Monday was Epiphany, the arrival of the Magi to meet the light of the world. Yet our second reading today is from Acts, where Peter is sharing the Good News with Gentiles; clearly this event happened **after** Jesus' baptism...after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

Staying true to the church's seasons and its liturgical calendar, can be confusing.

So – we are in the season of Epiphany or as some traditions like to call it, Ordinary Time, between **the** Epiphany and Shrove Tuesday. AND...we're also talking about baptism, Jesus' baptism.

When the calendar and its lectionary readings get disjointed and confusing, it sometimes helps to compare similarities and/or differences between the events and the readings.

- *Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him.*

What connections do we see?

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The Magi. They were foreigners, outsiders and pagans; not Jews. They were from a far-off foreign land. They watched the stars for messages, signs and guidance. The night sky, full of stars, constellations and other amazing heavenly bodies, provided images, symbols, guidance and cycles of life for their beliefs and day-to-day living.

These wise strangers saw a great light; an unusual, bright, new star appear in the sky and they believed that that astrological phenomenon meant that a new ruler had been born somewhere in the world. This newborn child would be the light of life.

They brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, items that had been traded for thousands of years throughout the Middle East and Northern Africa. They were valuable and practical gifts – used for currency, perfume and anointing. They were also meaningful gifts - symbolizing kingship, priesthood and death. These foreign pagans came as **witnesses** to new life and to honor the newborn king.

The word Epiphany comes from the Greek epiphania, which means manifestation or revelation and suggests a shining light. The Magi followed an unusual and bright light to find an unusual and bright light – a gift from God revealed to humanity.

These outsiders, who had no intention of “converting” to Judaism or the way of Jesus, at least as far as we know, knew that something cosmic and unfathomable happened with this birth and they journeyed over 1000 miles to get there. The birth of the Christ was a light unto the world and good news for all, as evidenced by their appearance at his manger. The Magi **witnessed** God fulfilling not only God’s promises to Israel to bring forth a Messiah, but also the longings of all humans for salvation. The light of life is for all people and will draw people from far and wide.

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So, with our disjointed liturgical calendar, on the day we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord, we have a reading from The Acts of the Apostles...skipping over Jesus’ actual baptism (and life and death and resurrection) to The Acts of the Apostles and Peter’s testimony.

- *I really am learning that God doesn’t show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships [God] and does what is right is acceptable to [God].*

What connections do we see?

The full context of the reading from Acts takes us to the beginning of chapter ten. At the beginning of chapter 10, Cornelius, a devout, Pagan captain in the Italian Regiment, has a vision in which an angel of God appears to him. The angel advises this pagan centurion that God is pleased with him and he is to seek out the Apostle Peter.

Meanwhile, Peter has a vision of his own. The vision in which a giant sheet is lowered from heaven. In it were all kinds of animals. A voice tells Peter to eat, but Peter protests that they’re unclean animals. The voice tells Peter that nothing God creates is unclean.

Then the two meet. Peter is summoned to Cornelius’ home. Among all of his family, friends and servants, the pagan soldier tells the Jewish apostle of his vision, “Now we are all here in the presence of God, waiting to hear anything that the Lord has instructed you to say.” Then Peter began to speak to them...

- *...God doesn’t show partiality*
- *We are witnesses to all that [Jesus] did*

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The Magi, foreign pagans, were witnesses to new life – a newborn baby, a light of life to save all. After worshipping the baby, they were warned in a vision to return home via a different route.

Cornelius, a pagan soldier, witnessed new life – a spiritual baptism for himself and his household as the Holy Spirit came down on all those who were listening to Peter’s message. Having received the Holy Spirit, Peter baptized them all in the name of Jesus Christ.

As we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord, we recall the of witness Jesus’ birth by outsiders; a gift by God for all of humanity.

On this First Sunday after Epiphany, the church remembers the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist as recounted in the gospels. In that story, the power of the Holy Spirit is evident at the very outset of Jesus' public life of faith. Jesus surfaces from the waters of the Jordan, the heavens open, a dove descends, and a voice from heaven declares, "You are my beloved Child; with you I am well pleased."

We recall God’s manifest presence in this and the many other episodes of Jesus’ life. As we reflect on Jesus' baptism, we might follow Martin Luther's advice, in his larger catechism, to consider and recall our own baptism as well. Luther did not support repeating baptism but called on us to make repeated use of our baptism. He said, "A truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism once begun and ever to be continued." Whether we have been baptized or not, remember it or not, we have opportunity today to claim and rejoice in the very real ways in which God comes to light in the church and in our lives. Through baptism, God declares that we are beloved children of God. God is well pleased.

We are witnesses to the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ. “We might be tempted to think that our witness could not possibly rise to [the] level [of the Magi, the apostles or even Cornelius] because we are not eyewitnesses of the events as they were. And yet, I would argue that we do have the same opportunity to become witnesses of what we have experienced. The power of the new life that was unleashed in this world by Jesus’ [baptism and] resurrection is still working to transform our hearts and lives today.”<sup>1</sup>

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I now want to invite forward anyone who is able and would like to renew their baptismal covenant. If you’d like to come forward, dip your finger in the water, put it on your forehead and receive a blessing.

<<< remember your baptism and be thankful >>>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://thewakingdream.erblogspot.com/2009/07/style-definitions-table.html>

Renew in us, O God, all the gifts of baptism—strength for life's journey, courage in time of suffering, the joy of faith, the freedom of love, and the hope of new life; through Jesus Christ who makes us one. Amen.