

Heaven Opened

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



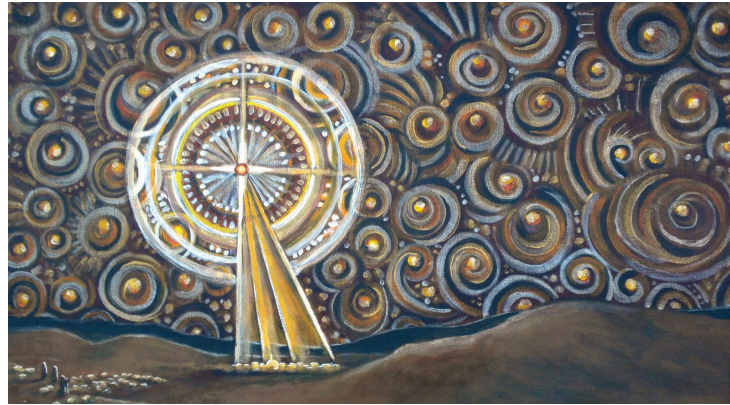
Prayer of Illumination

God, you are a God who speaks as well as listens.
As these words from Scripture are read,
may it be to us as if the heavens are opening,
and we see your Spirit descending on us like a dove,
revealing your love for us as your sons and daughters,
through your Beloved Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Background

Epiphany. Webster's dictionary defines epiphany as an appearance or manifestation, especially of a divine being. An epiphany can be a sudden perception or clarification of the true nature of something. An epiphany is a divine disclosure or revelation—a holy "aha" moment.

In the spiritual realm, an epiphany is that experience or encounter with the divine where heaven's veil is briefly lifted and we get a glimpse of God's glory. It's a thin place where the lines of heaven and earth are blurred and intermingled.



"Advent Starry Night" by Virginia Wieringa, 2019

All the gospel passages during the Sundays of Epiphany shed light on the mystery of who Jesus is. As we watch him speak and act in these stories, our picture of him gets a little more focused, and we catch glimpses in Christ of who God is and what God is doing in the world.

This Christmas we've been gazing upon the Christ child born for us and our salvation. Now we're about to see Jesus first act as an adult—his baptism. This too is an epiphany, a watershed moment where we see the miracle of Christ's humility and just what kind of Son this Son of God is.

We see that Jesus is willing to plunge into the waters with us, fully immersed in the river of our human frailties, going down with us in our tears and suffering, our fears and failures and disappointments.

Why is God pleased with his beloved Son? Because he wades into that water with us, side by side.

Scripture: Matthew 3:13-17 (NRSVue)

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved,^[a] with whom I am well pleased."

**The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.**

SERMON – “Heaven Opened”



“Baptism of Christ” by Andrea del Verrocchio and Leonardo da Vinci

I like how one translation phrases our opening verse: *“then Jesus appeared at the Jordan.”*

Jesus’ baptism is an epiphany, an epiphany of epiphanies because it is the appearance not only of Jesus, but of the Godhead—the very manifestation of the Trinity:

- The Son’s humility and commitment to honor his Father by wading into the baptismal waters of the Jordan.
- The voice of the Father affirming his Son.
- The Spirit like a dove alighting upon Christ to empower him to do God’s will.

Two crucial themes in Matthew’s gospel are found in this short passage.

First, **fulfillment**. Fifteen times Matthew speaks of the fulfillment of Scripture. By submitting to baptism, Christ fulfills the ancient prophecies of Scripture:

- First from Psalm 2:7, *“You are my son, this day I become your father.”*
- Second from Isaiah 42:1, *“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I take delight.”*

The second theme is **righteousness**. Righteousness is a life lived out of a restored relationship with God. Righteousness is acting in alignment with God’s will and God’s plan. The Spirit of God, resting upon Jesus like a dove, was empowering him to carry out God’s plan on earth.

But John the Baptist didn’t quite understand God’s will and plan in this situation. No Jesus, I can’t baptize you... *you* need to baptize *me*. But Jesus lovingly and firmly resists. To fulfill all righteousness John, you need to baptize me.

Jesus needed John. This is the good news: we need Jesus. We need the Holy Spirit. But also Jesus needs us to help carry out God's plan of righteousness. You are needed here to continue Christ's ministry. You are a part of his work; we are the Body of Christ.

By being baptized by John, Jesus was affirming John the Baptist's ministry and message. And he was identifying with us completely. God's plan of righteousness, for Jesus and for us, is the way of humility and service. Or as the book of Philippians puts it,

*"Leave no room for selfish ambition and vanity,
but humbly reckon others better than yourselves."*

Even though Jesus was without sin, he was humbling himself by this baptism which was setting him apart for service. This is what Jesus was about from beginning to end. Jesus concluded his ministry dying on a cross between two thieves. He commenced his ministry in a river with sinners.

The movie *The King and I* came out a long time ago. But there's a fascinating scene in the movie where Anna, the English governess of the Siamese king's children, learns the protocol of what you do in the king's presence. No one's head must ever be higher than the king's. If he's in the room and you're taller than he is, you have to stoop or lower your head so that his remains higher. The king enters the room. Anna lowers her head. Then playfully—but also to show his power—he lowers his. She lowers hers again. He stoops down. She stoops even lower. Finally he drops to his knees, and she has to go flat out on the floor. The point is made.

But now imagine that scene in reverse. Picture a totally different protocol—the king has to go lower than the one in his presence. No one's head can be lower than his. He's the one who ends up prostrate before the governess. This is Jesus. And this is his God. Going down deep into the waters for us. Getting on his knees to wash our feet. Being laid in a tomb so we might live.

The epiphany of Jesus' baptism is that Jesus came to serve, not be served. Like Christ, as Christians, we're anointed by the Spirit to live an epiphany life of service:

- A life of dying to yourself.
- Putting others first.
- A lifestyle of sacrificial love.

May we, by the grace of God, be living epiphanies of Christ's love and service here on earth.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "Entering Epiphany" © Jan Richardson, janrichardson.com

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