

IFL250112 sermon distribution

Title: Epiphany!

Today we celebrate the Baptism of Christ, as related in the Gospel of Matthew chap 3. In celebrating Christ's baptism, we also recall our OWN baptism, by which God adopted us into his family. We, who were outsiders, by a miracle of God, are now insiders. We have a relationship with God which is so close that we are considered to be "family members."

We are also celebrating the Epiphany season. (Epiphany was Jan 6, 6 days ago.) Next to Christmas and Easter, Epiphany is one of our high holidays. For centuries, Epiphany celebrated the discovery of the Christ child by the Magi from the East, commonly known as "the three kings from the orient." But it wasn't the visitation of the Magi which makes Epiphany so remarkable. What is truly significant about Epiphany is that it signifies that Jesus is for all people. The discovery of the baby Jesus by the Wisemen from the East showed that Jesus' salvation was offered not only to the Jews but to gentiles as well, to US as well. As the angel said to the shepherds "I bring you tidings of great joy, which shall be to ALL men. As John the apostle wrote "God so loved THE WORLD that he gave his only son.... Epiphany is a celebration that the great good news of Christ is for all mankind, for me and for you and that is great news indeed. We who were outsiders, are now considered to be insiders. We who were enemies are now children of God. As adopted children we have all the rights and privileges of a child by blood. It is so important to remember what we are, or more importantly whose we are - "We are the children of God."

So, this has tremendous consequences. Because it tells us to whom do we belong? Not only that but "how you act" "what you think about yourself" "what you allow others to think about you," "your very self image," pivots around the question "To whom do you belong?" If I believe that I belong to this world, I believe that I am a man of this world, I will seek to master the powers of this world. I will set my standards according to the values of this world. I will maximize my life here on Earth, seeking material wealth and security. On the other hand... if I believe that I belong to God, I am a man of God. I will submit myself to the power of God. I will set my standards according to Godly values. I will live my life on Earth seeking eternal goals. "To whom do I belong?" As a Christian... I belong to Jesus Christ. and I will live my life as such. I belong to Jesus Christ. and I will live my life as such.

Now, I used the words “adopted children of God.” There are many people who struggle with this... i.e. the concept of being adopted children of God. However, the analogy with legal adoption is a good one. For example, sometimes when adopted children get older, they go through identity crisis. They struggle with the question "to whom do I belong, my biological parents or my adopted parents?" Some are able to come to grips with this and live in peace with their adoptive parents, while others are literally driven to locate their biological parents. I wonder how many of these adopted children fully realize the unique status they have. They were chosen. Their adoptive parents CHOSE them! Not only chose them, but chose to endure quite a bit of hassle just to get them, the waiting, the money, the paperwork, the emotional pain. I wonder how important is the fact that when you are adopted into a family, you are legally a full member of the family, with all rights and responsibilities. Legally no distinction made between the biological and adopted children. If the adopted child, in its identity crisis, chooses to reject his adoptive parents, chooses to reject the ones who nurtured him and loved him, it can deal horrible pain and damage to family and friends.

As the family of God we too are all adopted children. Everyone here was adopted by God at our baptism. And as adopted children we live with the wonderful fact that we too were chosen, chosen by God. We all have the unique status of being chosen. It is very important that we realize our life, our eternal salvation, lies in the status we have as adopted children of God. God chose us before we were born! We were chosen to be His sons and daughters before we were even conceived. He chose us not because of something we did or because of any merit we have, but because He first loved us. He chose us because it was his pleasure and will. He chose us, and he wished upon us all the good things which we could be, to be holy and blameless before his sight. to live life according to the way he designed it to be lived, to live life to the fullest. Since before creation, he wished this.

So, if this is true, then why is “life” in this world not perfect? Well, there was a reason. Scripture tells us that because of our sinfulness we were unable to live out the perfect life which God had planned for us. Since the Fall of Adam and Eve, our Human nature has been corrupted separated from God and became sinful. Our sinful nature, our human nature is to never do God's will, never to follow the Law by which God created His universe. By our original sinful nature, scripture says we became enemies of God. For all this, all mankind deserved Hell. For all this, all mankind deserved death. This is why the world is not perfect. This is why life is not perfect. Mankind brought it down upon ourselves.

Yet God, our creator, loved us so much that he did not want to leave us there. God wanted us to live the joy which he destined for us. So, to accomplish this, God had a plan. Matt 8: Luke 3:21, records a most significant event.

¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Why was this significant? For the first time since the fall of Adam and Eve, God was pleased with a human being. Not simply pleased with His Son, but pleased with man! The Holy Spirit, like a dove, descended upon Christ and God publicly acknowledged that he was well-pleased with his Son. For the first time since the fall of Adam and Eve, the separation between a human and God had been bridged. The relationship with God which Adam and Eve had at the garden of Eden was restored. When Christ died on a cross and paid for our sins, that relationship with God has been offered to us. That special gift was given to you at your baptism. At our baptism a saving faith was planted in us. At our baptism God looks down upon US and says to US "YOU are my sons and daughters whom I love." "In YOU I am well pleased." Because of what Christ has done, we have been adopted into God's family as his children. As we recall our baptism, it becomes a reminder that we are God's children.

But it is more than a reminder. Our baptism comes with power, the power to change what we are. At our baptism, God sends his Holy Spirit upon us. God is at work in us. You see, even after we were adopted into God's family the sinful nature still shows itself. The new man created by God and the old nature battles within us. Therefore, even though we are saved, even though we are adopted children of God we still sin. What God HAS done for us is He has FREED us from our sinful nature.

What does it mean to be freed from sin? I see a lot of Christians, who frankly don't act like Christians. Doesn't being freed from sin mean, "I don't sin anymore"? Well, not really. Let me explain. A great analogy is a bird in a cage. The cage keeps the bird from flying. Though it may chirp cheerfully at times, it is really being kept from doing what it truly was made to do, which is to fly freely. So, the analogy is this... for those who do not know Jesus' salvation, they are like birds in a cage. The cage is sin. Sin holds them in bondage. Sin keeps them from doing what in the long run would make them truly happy. Suppose now,.... someone comes by and opens the cage door. Now the bird is free to fly away. It has been

freed from the bondage of the cage. The cage cannot stop her from flying away freely. This is what God has done for us. When He baptized us, he opened the door to our cage. We are freed from being slaves to sin. However, while we are still on Earth, there is a problem. Even though we are freed, our sinful nature tempts us to stay in the cage. A friend of mine had a parakeet. Even though he frequently left the door of the cage open, the bird would never fly away. Either it didn't notice the door is open or didn't quite get the idea that it was free or perhaps living in a cage had just become habit. So it is with those who have been baptized, chosen by God, saved by Christ, but haven't acted upon their state as a new creation, or have forgotten that they are a free person in Christ Jesus. They live life according to the old corrupted ways. They haven't taken flight. They haven't exercised their freedom and power as a new creation of God. The sad part is that while they are not slaves to sin by bondage, they are slaves to sin by choice.

But you are different! You have chosen to leave your cage. For all those who have come here to worship God today.... we have acted upon the freedom Christ has given us. Instead of spending Sunday in a self-serving manner, we have chosen to respond to the love which our Lord has shown us. You belong to Jesus. You are free birds! You have the Holy Spirit to empower you to live life how God created us to live. All praise to God!

But our task is not ended.... God has a mission for us. This world is filled with caged birds. There are many in this world, who do not have a relationship with Jesus Christ. This world is filled with caged birds, many who do not even know they are caged. There are many who are caught in the cage of sin and stay in there by their own choice. They live their lives in ways which clearly do not give glory to God. They may even mock Christians. Our first reaction may be to reject them. But I would say to you... do not judge them. Do not judge them because they live according to the values of this world. Do not judge them because they live lives which are not pleasing to God. Do not judge them because... "They are in the cage of sin!!!!" They do not have a living relationship with Jesus, they do not have the power of the Holy Spirit, to live otherwise. They are forced to be this way by Satan. They are forced to live lives which are sinful, and they don't even know they are being forced. Do not judge them. Have pity!!!! They are caged!!!! They do not have the power to do otherwise. Have pity. Some may have even heard about the open door, but do not understand what it means to walk out the door. They need to know that the door is open. You have the key. Let them know about Jesus. For only with a relationship with Jesus, only by the power of the Holy Spirit, will they be able to act upon the freedom which Christ brings to us. You can bring freedom to them. Tell them about Jesus!

