

Sermon for 8 January 2023 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Baptism of the Lord

Scriptures: Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalter: UMH 761, Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3 :13-17

"And now, this"

Were you surprised, like me, when someone referred to the attack on the U.S. capitol recently and noted that this was the *second* anniversary of it? Like "9/11," it's become part of history, a stunning reality we'll be interpreting from now on.

Along that line, it just dawned on me lately that I've never heard "January 6," our now-familiar historical moment of American history, in any way connected with the church's celebration of "Epiphany," the coming of the "Wise Men" to honor the baby Jesus. As I mentioned last Sunday, this festival, or feast, of Epiphany, which is also on January 6, recognizes the world-wide significance of Christ, and is regarded by a large part of the world-wide Christian community as more important than Christmas, ranking along with Easter and Pentecost as one of the three pivotal Christian holidays.

Indeed, with Christmas coming so close to the second Sunday this New Year's, we barely mentioned the Wise Men last week, except to connect them with Joseph's taking the Holy Family away into Egypt to escape King Herod's anger and all its terror.

All of which reminds us that Sunday worship is just full of memory-verses and historical reminders ... We make use of the Way, as Christianity soon came to be called, as one practices yoga, or becomes a runner, or says grace over meals, or any number of self-teaching practices, to establish ourselves in a way of life, and of behaving as a caring fellowship, that opens us to God and to the meaning of love for all humankind, and for nature, and reality in its entirety.

And so, as I've expressed it in my sermon title, ... "And now, this."

This is the annual moment to be like Jesus, and make a pledge to give our whole selves to God, and to accept God's offer of life in the Spirit.

I am always both thrilled and humbled to do this with you. I never get far from the amazement that being Christian brings. The incredible relief that comes of its own accord, in its own way, and on its own schedule, from time to time is the biggest fact I hold onto, starting with the bedside prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep..." that some adult in my family always knelt at my side to repeat, and reaching to the relief after great fear, or sight of a lovely sunset of the kind we've recently had so many ... to Well, you fill in the blanks. Right alongside that is the awareness that I often don't understand God or find the Bible's teachings fully explaining life or my feelings or why people do things.. So it's a leap, every year, to make this vow with you, just as it's amazingly beautiful and reassuring.

I'm honored to be leading this renewal of vows, and pray with you that it will work its magic within us in the coming year. Thanks be to God. Amen.

