

**FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH** – January 10, 2021  
First Sunday After The Epiphany | The Baptism of the Lord

**WORSHIP FOCUS:** “Epiphany”

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. - *the Gospel of Matthew*

**1<sup>st</sup> LESSON:** Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

**2<sup>nd</sup> LESSON:** Acts 19:1-7

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?”

They replied, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”

Then he said, “Into what then were you baptized?”

They answered, “Into John’s baptism.”

Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.”

On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And, when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied -- altogether there were about twelve of them.

**3<sup>rd</sup> LESSON:** Mark 1:4-11 (NRSV)

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

**REFLECTION:** “Washington -- Wednesday January 6, 2020”

Earlier this week, we all watched the President of the United States of America incite a crowd of his followers to violence with the words, “Our country has had enough,” and then telling the crowd to take matters into their own hands, with the words, “You will never take back our country with weakness.” As a result of the President’s words, his followers attacked the US House of Congress, intent on lynching Vice President Pence on gallows they had hastily erected on the lawn outside. They stormed the building. They entered the chamber. They stopped the government. And, at the end of the day, five people were dead, and the whole world was reeling.

Something had become apparent.

Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House, responded to the day’s shameful tragedy with words that you may have heard or read yourselves: “It has been an epiphany for the world to see that there are people in our country led by this president, for the moment, who have chosen their whiteness over democracy. This cannot be exaggerated. The complicity, not only the complicity, the instigation of the president of the United States must and will be addressed.”

Epiphany.

It is a word we do not use often. It is a noun. It is a religious word, usually used to describe the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the three wise men. This is, as you may know, is precisely the liturgical church season that we are in. But an epiphany can also be a little less specific. It is a word that can be used to describe the manifestation of a divine or supernatural being. Hmm. . . Maybe this week we saw an anti-Christ? The word epiphany can also just simply mean a moment of sudden revelation or insight. Hmm... As you looked out at the mob, did you notice that there was not one racialized person there? That the police and the military looked pretty laid back? Complicit. Did you see tear gas, rubber bullets, dogs and bully sticks being smashed into people’s faces? Did you remember the peace crowd of Black Lives Matter protesters being violently subdued just a few months ago by the President so that he could stand in front of a church clutching a Bible like a weapon?

I can tell you, I had a revelation. I can tell you that I am stuck in a season of Epiphany. As Nancy Pelosi suggests, the whole world is having an epiphany.

The veil has been torn. The appearance of normalcy we revealed to be an illusion. The world glimpsed the darkness behind. The scales fell from our eyes. The epiphany that the world had, and that Nancy Pelosi is talking about, is the horrible realization that the leading democratic state in the world, the country that has offered inspired leadership and guidance to the free world since the end of the second world war, has failed. Its light is going out. It is no longer a moral leader. Its people are turning to fascist ways of thinking. Might is right. Can’t get what you want? Well then, kick, scream, claw, slap, shoot, kill. If you can be violent enough and scare people enough, you will get what you want, your own personal American nightmare.

That first Epiphany with the Wise Men, was a little bit like this, wasn’t it? Three wise men come from the east. They see a Star. They believe that the Star is a sign of a great thing about to happen. They follow the Star to a faraway land. They know that this Star had something to do with a child, and a kind of power, and leadership, and so they go to see the king of the land, Herod, figuring that he, as leader, will know something about the child and the Star, and provide them with details of the wonder and blessing.

The King, however, despite his claims of greatness, knows nothing at all about the Prince of Peace. About wonderful. About counsellor. Or about how a king could possibly be a suffering servant. Herod only believes in power – in might is right. Like Donald Trump, he does not

believe that you can keep a country through weakness. He is threatened by the Wise Men's dreams of this child. He sees this harmless child as a threat to his power.

And so, Herod wines and dines the Wise Men, and tries to hoodwink them into becoming his friends. He gives them a ticket to his New Year's Eve party at Mar Al Lago, perhaps. He flashes them his pearly whites. He tells them his charming stories. And then, plying the Wise Men with gifts, sure that he has them in his corner, Herod sends them out to find the child.

But, Herod's ruse is not successful. The Wise Men have an epiphany. An angel appears before them and the Wise Men realize that Herod is not the nice, amazing, captivating, generous, spellbinding host he has done such a good job of appearing to be. The wise men realize that Herod wants to kill this child. They realize that Herod wants to destroy the hope and the new way of living and being for all people that this child has been born to bring into the world. Herod is revealed to be who he is, by an angel. And so, after this Epiphany, the Wise Men visit the Christ child, they offer the child their gifts, and then, although they have promised to return to Herod's pleasure palace for another party or two, bringing him news of the child, they return home secretly, by another route.

Herod is revealed to the Wise Men to be who he is, and they change their behaviour accordingly, just as this week as the President has been revealed, many of his Wise Counsellors are resigning, and returning home by another road than the one that first brought them to the White House.

But our Epiphany story is not over. When Herod realizes that he has been betrayed, he reveals himself to be the monster he really is to his people, causing the firstborn sons of all the Israelites to be slaughtered. He slaughters the innocent.

It has been said that a people get the government that they deserve. We all know this saying. When we saw that mob outside the capital building, smashing windows, waving their placards, taking selfies, and saw that they were so much like us in terms of ethnicity, and age and economic bracket, when white America and Canada saw who they were – it was a kick in the gut. I am still reeling from it. This is who many of us are becoming, I was unable to stop thinking. A sizeable portion of us is falling into madness.

And the big Epiphany that I am having, and that the whole world is having, is that we have been complicit. We have stood by fascinated for four years. We have chosen to see what is going on as entertainment. As far from home. As another country's problem.

And people have died. People have gotten sick. Children at the border have been taken away from their parents perhaps never to be reunited again. Black lives have not mattered. As Western Democracy has teetered on the brink of mob rule, everywhere the innocent are being slaughtered. And they are being slaughtered because we have kept permitting it. "It can't get any worse," we say. And, every time we say this, we let it get worse.

Epiphanies shock us usually. They are like mirrors that show us as who we really are. They are wake up calls. We want them to be wonderful. We want them to be like Jesus' baptism. We want them to be a dove, descending from heaven, over the waters, telling us lovingly, "you are our son, you are our daughter, with you I am well pleased."

We want the epiphany to be the second baptism of the spirit with water.

And yet, too often our epiphany is at the hands of the Baptist. Too often it is terrifying. John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He looks suspiciously like the terrifying Q-Anon Shaman, the bare-chested guy with the horns. The Baptist rages and calls us to repentance. He says that even he himself is not worthy. And he calls us to consider our own unworthiness.

Acts tells us, that “while Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?’

They replied, ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’

Then he said, ‘Into what then were you baptized?’

They answered, ‘Into John’s baptism.’

Paul said, ‘John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.’”

As a Western people we are amid an epiphany of terrifying proportions. Herod, Pharaoh, The Prince of Darkness, has been revealed to be amongst us. The power and principality of evil is strong. And people very much like us have supported this. There is a part of each of us that supports what has happened.

The message of this dark epiphany, is the revelation that we have had Herod in our hearts for four years. That we are familiar with him. That we are, to a certain extent, comfortable with him.

The question is, now that the veil has been ripped and we can see the darkness, How are we to disengage from Herod? How are we to leave his castle? How are we to turn away from all the delights of his Twitter, his antics, his entertainment value, his shock value, and the phrases we catch spilling from his mouth that delight us secretly? How are we to repent? How are we to turn from the darkness, and see the spirit of God hovering over it? How are we to turn to the light? How are we even to believe that that light is possible?

How are we to turn to the Christ child this Epiphany? How are we to hold on to the Christ child? How are we to see in the weak, crying, poor, vulnerable, Jewish, middle Eastern, child of an unwed teenager, our salvation?

Could it be that in truly seeing that black lives matter, or the lives of our first nation children, or the lives of our Sikh or Muslim neighbours, or lifting up the marginalized people in our community who look after our elderly and work in essential services -- seeing those other than ourselves, and not worrying about our own power and privilege -- that we can, in fact, be saved?

What child is this? What epiphany has been born to us this terrible and terrifying week? What rough beast is slouching towards Jerusalem?

This week we have seen the beast.

That is the epiphany.

The question is, what next?