

Homily for the Second Sunday after Epiphany

Michael Fitzpatrick, 18 January 2026

An epiphany is an unveiling, a disclosure of something which has been in plain view the whole time. The mere appearances fall away and suddenly the truth is exposed. In a mystery novel, a character who has appeared innocent the whole story is suddenly revealed to be the loathsome murderer. In a fairy tale, a peasant girl discovers she is the long lost heir to the throne and the rightful monarch of the kingdom. In a romance comedy, a person discovers that their true love is the one who had been steadfast by their side while they sought love in all the wrong places.

In the opening narrative to John's Gospel, we encounter two epiphanies, though their order in the narration is opposite their order in the chronology. Chronologically, the first epiphany is Jesus' revelation to John of who he truly is. The second epiphany is John's proclamation to those gathered of who Jesus is.

Here is a young peasant Jew, a carpenter from up north in Nazareth. He has wandered south to the Jordan River, where a somewhat eccentric wilderness preacher named John the Baptizer has been proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is at hand, baptizing those who sincerely repent and rededicate their lives to their God. Jesus has been in the crowd gathered to hear John for some weeks now. He would have appeared to John or to the others as just another pilgrim seeking the Spirit of God in the wilderness.

John the Baptizer himself testifies that he did not know Jesus personally, nor could he have picked him out of the crowd. But he had received a vision, a promise from the Living God. See, God had instructed John to baptize those who repent with water as a sign of their cleansing and renewal. However, John was told he would soon encounter a person who is commissioned to baptize with the Holy Spirit. John would know this person by the sign of seeing the Spirit descend upon them.

That's rather intense language, and for many of us, like the children's Bibles, we prefer to imagine this according to the simile John employs when telling others what he saw, that the Spirit descended upon Jesus from heaven like a dove. We imagine the clouds opening up and a dove coming down from the sunlight and landing on Jesus' shoulder. As lovely as that image is, it's not what John actually saw.

Sometimes we just think that John's epiphany was that all of a sudden, as Jesus was standing there, a bright aura formed around Jesus, as if someone had a mirror behind Jesus in the sunlight. But again, that is not what John actually saw.

No, what John the Baptizer is telling us is that one day he saw someone come down the Jordan bank to hear John preach or maybe to be baptized, and when John looked at him the first time, he saw just another subjugated Jewish artisan. When he looked again, he could see someone who comported himself with an authority to baptize with a power that comes from heaven, not from any river.

In other words, on the first glance he saw an earthly human embedded into the network of earthly social relations and power imbalances that made up first-century Judea under Roman imperial occupation. On the second glance he saw the Son of God reigning in a kingdom not of this world and being sent from his Father to baptize people into the life and community of the Holy Spirit.

For that is what Epiphany is all about. It's not about blinding light appearing or doves coming down or transcendent chorale music playing on a soundtrack cue. Rather, it's about something appearing as if it exists within one economy of power and relation only to discover that in reality it is the very source of all power and relation.

John looked at the man on the river bank with him, and he saw the Son of God. He saw that Jesus is Lord, that he is invested with all the power, authority, and fullness of the Creator in the flesh. He saw a person sent by and indwelt with the Holy Spirit, and therefore completely foreign to and beyond the relations of domination constructed by Rome or the Jewish authorities or the economic leaders. What he saw was a person who lived in time the kind of life God has in eternity.

Rowan Williams summarizes the epiphany of Jesus for us in an essay on early Christian writings that we're reading this week for the Tuesday night study group. Williams writes,

“[I]f Jesus was ‘Lord’, and if God needed no force to defend his authority against rivals, the extraordinary

implication was that Jesus' 'policy' was God's, that Jesus shared without qualification the Wisdom of God and the self-sufficiency of God – that's to say, he depended on nothing other and nothing less than God for being who he was" (106).

When John the Baptizer looked at Jesus, he didn't see a person scraping out a living, fighting for parking space in downtown Bainbridge Island, struggling to buy a home, trying to assert his voice in a zero-sum world. He saw a person completely at home in his own skin who demands nothing and is therefore free to give everything. God is free to give generously and graciously, and when the "Spirit descends upon Jesus," it means John was suddenly able to see that the kind of free generosity and grace of God was fully there in Jesus. To see Jesus was to see God at work; God at work was Jesus teaching and healing around Judea and Galilee.

But as I said, there is a second epiphany in our Gospel narration. The second epiphany is when John the Baptizer, rather than keeping this profound revelation to himself, begins telling every person he meets that "I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." In fact, he says that he came baptizing people with water for this very reason: to prepare the way for Jesus to be revealed to the people.

And so John proclaims to the crowd, to those he baptizes, to everyone he meets, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" John is a conduit of epiphany, inviting others to share in his vision of Jesus.

‘Lamb of God’ here refers to the Paschal lamb of Exodus 12.1-11. The Hebrew slaves were instructed to take a lamb without defect per household, and slaughter it for their evening meal, and to take a bit of its blood and cover the doorstep as a sign to the Spirit of God to ‘pass over’ their house when rendering judgement upon the Egyptians and forcing the Pharaoh to finally release the Hebrew slaves. It is commemorated annually by Jewish people to this day in their Passover celebrations.

In declaring Jesus to be the Lamb of God and to take away the sin of the world, John the Baptizer is presenting Jesus as the new Paschal Lamb, the sacrificial embodiment of God’s deliverance, this time not from Pharaoh but from the very system of sin itself.

John the Baptizer goes on to utter one of my favorite lines in all of scripture. He says, “After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.” If your head is spinning a little at that line, don’t worry — heads in the First Century were spinning also. What does this mean?

Well, obviously the first part is stating empirical fact. John had been in the wilderness for a while at work in the ministry God had given him before Jesus came along. But John says that this man who comes “after me” nonetheless “ranks ahead of me.” Here we have a statement of importance. John is the messenger who has gone out ahead of the sovereign to announce their coming. Now that sovereign has arrived. Jesus is the one of ‘higher’ rank because while John is a faithful prophet, Jesus is the very fulfillment of prophecy.

Well and good, but what could John possibly mean when he says that this man “ranks ahead of me because he was before me”? Here’s the most shocking part of the epiphany. John is saying that while in historical time Jesus is just now showing up, in the life of God Jesus always was, because Jesus is here doing what God has always been about. John was sent to proclaim the coming Kingdom, but it is a Kingdom that lives eternally. Jesus is not the revelation of a new God; rather, he’s the confirmation of who God was all along.

And who is this God revealed in Jesus to have been there before John? The whole point of the rich metaphor of Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world is to drive home the meaning that “God so loved the world.” God is love, the kind of love that sends a lamb to take away all sin and deliver us to freedom. The whole point of these epiphanies is to change lives and to spread that change far and wide, transforming people from every tribe, tongue, and nation into a beloved community united in the love revealed in Jesus.

The Rev. Canon Stephanie Spellers writes in her book *The Church Cracked Open*, “How do we know God is love? Because, in Jesus, God gives God’s own self away. . . . Now imagine that love stretched out, from you to me, from us to others. Watch as it enfolds not just a few people, not just a family, not just a racial group, not just a nation. Imagine it encompassing enemies, the whole human family, and the whole of God’s good creation.”

When we experience the epiphany of Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, then we can see that there is a different way of living than the competitive, destructive, winner-take-all system of values we find ourselves submerged in. Jesus declares that God's Kingdom is a system of values of mutual flourishing, creative freedom, and collective responsibility.

When we unite ourselves to this Jesus and become part of the Body of Christ, then this Lamb of God takes away our sin, liberating us from our submersion in the system of this world, and making us a new creation living by God's grace alone. That is what it means to be a Christian – it is to be grounded in the epiphany of God that transcends nature red in tooth and claw.

If we have experienced the epiphany of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, then we must go to our neighbor and say, "We have found the Messiah." Just as John the Baptizer did not keep his epiphany to himself but shared it with every person that he could, so we must be people who share this Good News that in a world of pervasive corruption and scandal and imperial conquest, there is another Kingdom that is not of this world but is for this world, and that in this Kingdom the ruler of all is one upon whom the Spirit descended and who has the power to make the first to be last and the last to be first, to bring down monarchs and presidents and prime ministers from their thrones, and to make a community where the pain of one is the pain of all, and the joy of one is the joy of all.

That is the epiphany of the God of love that was seen by John the Baptizer in Jesus of Nazareth, who was called the Christ. John shared this epiphany with all that he could. May each of us follow his good example and do likewise.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,
Amen.