

**The Baptism of Our Lord**  
Mark 1:4-11 (Matthew 2:1-23)

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Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Monday morning is when I start preparing my sermons each week. My week starts with an hour of text study with local pastors. This past Monday there were only two of us, but we dutifully went through the texts and ended up having a good discussion and generating some good ideas. I was excited about using this Gospel text on Jesus baptism as a point of departure for talking about our own baptism.

And then Wednesday happened, when a mob of right-wing extremists broke into the Capitol of the United States in an attempt to stop congress from certifying the electoral ballots of the 2020 presidential election. It just so happens that Wednesday was the January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany on the church calendar, the day when we remember and celebrate the coming of the magi, the “wise men” from the East, to the home of the young Jesus in Bethlehem, in order to pay him homage. You might remember that that story is not just about them following a star and bringing Jesus gifts. It is also about politics. This story takes up most of Matthew chapter 2, if you’ve got a Bible handy and want to follow along. The wise men showed up out of the blue in Jerusalem, looking for the newborn king of the Judeans. Their astrology had apparently given them this information. This was political, because there already was a king in Judea, and that king was Herod. When Herod heard about this, he was frightened, Matthew tells us, and all of Judea was frightened with him. I wonder if the Judeans were frightened *because* Herod was frightened. Maybe they knew that frightened kings can do some pretty frightening things with the power they hold, and that’s what they were afraid of. Because, of course, that’s what happened. Herod tries to figure out where and when this supposed king was born, and asks the wise men to report back to him when they’ve found him, because, he said, he wanted to pay homage as well. But that was a lie. Herod didn’t want to pay homage to this child. He wanted to kill him. Anyone claimed to be “king of the Judeans” was a direct threat to Herod’s position and power, and Herod was determined to hold on to that position and power at any cost. His lie was a way to make that happen. I doesn’t work, though, and the young Jesus is spared when an angel warns Joseph to take his family and leave town. And so Jesus, Joseph, and Mary become refugees in Egypt. The wise men also get a warning not to return to Herod, and they leave town by another road.

When Herod discovers that the wise men didn’t go along with this plan, when they refused to be pawns in his evil scheme, he’s not only frightened, but now he is infuriated. If he can’t find and kill the one whom the wise men have identified as the next king, well then he will just have to kill all of the male children in and around Bethlehem who are two years and under. It’s a price he’s willing to pay for maintaining his grip on power. But of course it’s not Herod who actually does the killing. He “sends and kills” them, Matthew writes, which means he has others to do his dirty work, others who will not refuse to participate in his evil, others who will somehow rationalize their participation, who will find it in their personal and career interests to slaughter infants and toddlers. Herod could not have maintained power without their help. I wonder what he might have told them to make their unsavory job a little easier. Maybe that the Bethlehemites were traitors who were trying to steal his throne? Maybe that they were in cahoots with foreign agents, those strange men from the East?

There is some good news in this story too, which I have already mentioned without naming it that way. The good news here, light in the darkness, is that Herod is not the only one with agents and accomplices. God has angels. God has Joseph. God has the wise men. And God has time. The angels warn Joseph, who acts quickly to get his family out of danger. The wise men are also warned

in a dream not to return to Herod, and they listen. They do not cooperate with Herod, and instead return to their own country. And finally, God has time. In time, Herod is dead, and Joseph can bring his family back, and the life of Jesus can unfold.

That's the story of Epiphany. Is it just a quaint story, like the fairy tales we read to our children? Can it teach us anything about our lives today? If so, is it only about personal and private things, our personal, private faith, our personal, private relationship with God that has nothing to do with our public lives? Are its lessons only like the lessons of Aesop's fables – slow and steady wins the race, don't bite the hand that feeds you, and so on – subjects for our private morning devotions, maybe, but not for the important decisions we make in the light of the day, whether individually or collectively? Or does this political story from the Gospel according to Matthew have something to say about our political lives today? Politics, after all, is how we organize our live together and how we relate to one another. Do you imagine that the Bible has nothing to say about that, that your faith is only about your personal thoughts and feelings?

As you no doubt have guessed by now, I see some connections with the Epiphany story and what happened in the Capitol on Epiphany 2021. A big lie, invented and and repeated by political leaders who want to hold on to their positions and power, incited a mob to violence against our legitimately-elected government. Sedition is the word for that. It's a word that appears in the Great Litany, which we don't use enough in our public worship. We use it at the Easter Vigil. It's hymn number 238, if you have a hymnal at home. "From war, bloodshed, and violence, from corrupt and unjust government, from sedition and treason: Good Lord deliver us." I love the Great Litany because it covers just about anything you could imagine to pray for. The next petition is about epidemics.

We can argue about how and to what extent our government may be corrupt and unjust. I think that is an inherent problem of power that no political party is immune from. Where there is power there will be corruption and injustice, "because people." So that petition of the Great Litany is one that needs always to be on our lips. But I think by now it is clear that there is no legitimate argument for calling the last election a "stolen election" or that there was "massive voter fraud," as has been repeatedly claimed by some of our political leaders. And one of the things that makes this clear to me is that no one has been willing to make this claim under oath in any of the many lawsuits that have been brought to challenge the election. People of faith, who claim to follow Jesus, "the way, the truth, and the life," have to be willing to stand up for the truth and to call a lie a lie. We have been silent about that lie too long, I think. And some who call themselves Christians actively promote that lie. Because of that, because of the complicity of people like us, people have lost their lives and the fabric of our society has been weakened.

So, we have to be willing to submit to the truth about ourselves, that we too are corrupt and unjust, and in need of God's mercy, that "we have turned from [God] and given ourselves into the power of sin" as we confessed a few moments ago. It is our baptism, brothers and sisters in Christ, that is our resource for making that confession, for repenting of our complicity in the sin of the world, and for being assured of forgiveness and new life for Jesus' sake. In just a few moments we will have the opportunity to affirm our baptism. I want you to know that this was planned well before the events of this past Wednesday, but what a happy coincidence! Grab yourself a bowl of water during the next hymn and join Helen and me as we gather at the font here at Grace. Use the water to make the sign of the cross over yourself and remember your own baptism. Let us together affirm God's promise of love and forgiveness for us, and our calling as God's agents for good in the world, like Joseph and the wise men. And as we do this, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, today, tomorrow and in the weeks and months to come. May God bless us, and may God bless our country in this dark time. Amen.