

“And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him.”

-Matthew 3:26

Two Feast Days

The feast of the Epiphany is January 6th. On the following Sunday we celebrate the feast of the Baptism of our Lord. The first Sunday after Epiphany always commemorates Christ's baptism. Sometimes these two feast days sneak up on us, especially when there is only one additional Sunday during the 12 days of Christmas.

So January 6th is Epiphany, and Sunday is Baptism of our Lord. One caveat though: some churches move the feast of the Epiphany to the nearest Sunday. For example, the Roman Catholic Church in the United States often makes this transfer. Either way, having Epiphany and Baptism of our Lord so close together can seem like a challenge for churches, especially when it comes to teaching. Here are some points to keep in mind:

Baptism and Epiphany go hand-in-hand

There is a good reason for the first Sunday after Epiphany to focus on Baptism. In fact, many churches will baptize children and adults on this Sunday, as it is one of the most appropriate days for baptisms. The key here is that Baptism is all about beginning. Jesus began his ministry with his own baptism, and today Christians see Baptism as beginning a committed journey with Jesus.

The season after Epiphany, as a whole, has much to do with beginnings: the beginning of Jesus' life, the start of his ministry, the calling of the disciples, and his first miracle. All of this helps us see Baptism as an important beginning, both for Jesus, and for us.

What about the magi?

The Revised Common Lectionary is clear that the gospel reading for Sunday January 8th is the story of Jesus being baptized in the river Jordan. So what do we say or do about the magi, who had their gospel reading on the day of Epiphany itself?

Well, both stories carry forward the theme of Jesus' identity taking shape. The magi identify Jesus as a king... and because the magi are from foreign lands, they identify

Jesus as a king for all people. In the baptism story, Jesus is also identified, but in this case his identity is the beloved son of God. As a teaching point, we may link the magi story with the baptism story by saying: “These Epiphany stories work together to show us who Jesus is... revealing the fullness of his identity. The magi show us one part of Jesus’ identity, the baptism shows us another part.”

The Trinity

One of my favorite teaching points for the Baptism of Christ involves the Trinity. The moment when Jesus is baptized is one of the only times in the Bible that the entire Trinity appears together. Consider the passage: the Son stands in the river, the Spirit descends like a dove, and the Father speaks from heaven. This Epiphany moment reveals yet another aspect of Jesus’ identity: his place as the second person of the Trinity.

Conclusion

As you observe these two feast days, we hope you rejoice in this important season of Epiphany. Jesus Christ has arrived, and there are many beginnings to celebrate.

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Featured image: Piero della Francesca, Baptism of Christ c. 1450