

# Sermon Text for January 12, 2025

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

## ***Romans 6:1-4, Matthew 3:13-17***

### ***“Baptism and Epiphany”***

We find ourselves this Sunday still in white because we are celebrating the baptism of Jesus, a Sunday that we remember that Jesus was baptized and so remember our own baptism. Likewise, we also celebrate that Epiphany has come and gone and as a result our church has been undecorated and here we find ourselves on the cusp of ordinary time. But these signs of the new year for the church always make me think of how do we evaluate how we are doing. What are some ways that you can measure the effectiveness of a church in the community. Businesses use the KGI, or the Key Goal Indicator to measure whether they have reached goals and are being as effective and as efficient as possible. But there is a huge difference between a business and a church, right?

You have heard the saying that a measure of the impact of a church in the community is that if the church went away would anyone notice? Okay, that’s quaint and folksy and we could definitely say that we would be missed from our preschool, to our youth group, to our worship, to our food bank, to our Community Impact Committee, to all of our general programs and activities. We know that we have an active church and we know that we would be missed.

Some use church membership as an indicator, others use finances as an indicator. Personally, the most important indicator of a church’s effectiveness and health is attendance. That has been a bit of a bumpy ride for churches since Covid and all of the current thinking goes against that and says that attendance is no longer an indicator of church health. I completely disagree while recognizing that things are very different now and I’m simply not sure if what we have done in the past will work now, while realizing that all I know is what I have done in the past. Our attendance last year declined by one person on average than from the year before. That to me is not acceptable. We have to do better.

But just this week I spoke with someone who uses a completely different KGI for churches and that is baptisms. How many individuals are you baptizing in the church. The goal for every church is for individuals to come to know Jesus and so baptisms is a clear measurement of whether that is happening or not. We are doing pretty well in that category as we consistently baptize half a dozen or more people, babies and adults, in church every year. So we can feel good about ourselves for that, and that should give us more motivating to welcome and invite

people to worship as a result. As Jen said, bringing people into worship is going to be our goal for the year.

In Scripture we see that the baptism of Jesus that we are looking at today and the Epiphany as seen with the visiting of the wise men to Jesus tell the same story. Jesus is revealed to the world in a variety of different ways in Matthew. We see also in Luke where the shepherds are used to reveal to the world that this new king is born. Luke also uses Anna and Simeon and Zechariah to reveal who Jesus is. This leaves us with the realization that our task as followers of Jesus is to reveal Jesus to all even if it makes us feel slightly embarrassed and even more uncomfortable. We are called to share Jesus so that he can be experienced by all.

### **READ**

I wonder if you remember your baptism. I don't remember mine, but I have seen a picture of it. My mom and my dad are in a church in Lisbon, Portugal, and my godfather, Jose Leite is holding me and both my dad and my godfather are wearing their Sunday robes and their preaching tabs. Everyone looks happy except for me. Our baptisms carry such deep meaning that is tied up together in our personal salvation story as well as the salvation story for all of humanity as found in Jesus Christ.

What we read in Romans this morning speaks about how we have been baptized into Christ Jesus and so as a result baptized into his death. It is the death of Jesus and his ensuing resurrection which liberates us from our sin. Remember what the angel told Joseph when Jesus is born, you are to name him Jesus, which means God save, why is he to call Jesus Jesus? Because he will save his people from their sins. For us our baptism is all about our salvation from our sins and our freedom into a new life in Christ.

In Romans we catch a glimpse of the enormity of what Jesus did for us. Every single one of us has a Savior who died for us and in our baptism we died with him so that we could be raised with in freedom and without sin. When you give yourself to Jesus that is what happens. Jesus is for everyone and our baptism is a sign of the absolutely inclusivity of Jesus' claim on our lives. That's why we read Romans this morning to underline what baptism means for us and it has everything to do with the forgiveness of our sins.

But our baptism, whether we remember it or not or whether we have pictures of it or not, is not the same as the baptism of Jesus as recounted in Matthew. This is very important for us to understand. We know that Jesus was perfect and so had no need to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins because he had no sin. We can read Hebrews 4:15. Why then, is Jesus

baptized here in this Scripture if it is not for the forgiveness of sins? Actually, the person who baptizes him, John the Baptist, asks the same question of Jesus as well. Why do you want me to baptize you?

Jimmy Carter is the first US President that I remember ever hearing about as a child. I moved to the United States from Italy in 1976 when I had just turned 8 years old. My house was sympathetic to Carter, so I was sympathetic to him. It wasn't until I was much older that I understood what a servant figure he was even while he was the President of the United States. His model of leadership as President is one that no President has been able to emulate to this day. But I heard a piece on him on NPR this week where he talked about going to the Jordan River exactly where Jesus was baptized. So he spoke about going to the exact place where we read John baptizing Jesus.

I've been there, but it was very different when Carter went in the 70's to how it is now. There are mine fields and signs all over the entry area with warnings not to wander off the path or you may step on a mine. You get to the river which is very narrow at that point and on the side where I stood was the Israeli side and you had Israeli soldiers in their uniforms with their machine guns strapped around their shoulders taking pictures with the tourists.

On the other side you have the country of Jordan with Jordanian soldiers with their machine guns across the river taking pictures with the tourists on that side. But Carter spoke of the other worldly experience it was to step into the river at potentially the same exact spot where Jesus stepped and where John the Baptist put up a weak fight so as not to baptize him because after all Jesus himself is the one who should have baptized him.

In this Scripture it almost seems like John is a bit embarrassed to be asked by Jesus to baptize him even though we read in vs.13 that this was the specific purpose of Jesus going to the Jordan was so that he could be baptized by John. This is how good leaders are able to lead, isn't it, where they don't put themselves above anyone else but rather look to put others in the spotlight and highlight the talents and the capabilities of others. As Romans 12:3 states that we are not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. That's a hard thing for people who are leaders to do, and I would especially think one who grew up being told that he was going to save his people from their sin.

But Jesus asks John to baptize him and eventually John agrees and as a result when Jesus comes out of the water the Scriptures states that the skies open. Jesus is baptized not for the sake of the forgiveness of his sins, but rather so that he could be manifested to the world as to who he

was. Some ancient manuscripts which did not become canonical have this statement as part of vs.16 – “A great light shone from the water and filled the people with fear.” While that is not the Bible, it is the sense of what was expected to happen. Jesus is being revealed to the world just as he was revealed to the world by the magi who came to visit him and then brought word back to their home towns across the globe.

Jesus was baptized so that he could be revealed to the world. In fact, not only was there a visible recognition of who Jesus is with the opening of the heavens, but we also hear the voice of God who identifies Jesus as his beloved son with whom he is well pleased. The phrase that begins with God saying: “This is”, provides us with a clear message of Jesus being identified publicly as the son of God. Jesus’ identity is clearly established in front of all the masses who have come to be baptized by John.

There is a clear link here between Jesus’ baptism and what is called the Epiphany, or the visit of the wise men. In fact, we use the word epiphany, like I just had an epiphany, synonymous to revelation. An epiphany is meant to describe a time in our life when we have revealed to us something that is divine or god induced. So the message for us this morning is that just as the wise men revealed Jesus to those to whom they returned, and just as Jesus was revealed to the masses in his baptism, how do we reveal Jesus to all in what we do and in our lives. The baptism of Jesus is all about Jesus being revealed and our responsibility in revealing Jesus in our the people with whom we come into contact.

This is going to be a challenging year for many of us. We aren’t used to inviting people to church. We aren’t used to talking about religions or Jesus with others. That is a line that we refuse to cross. But if you look hard enough you will see opportunities and I am asking you this year that this would be our KGI, our key goal indicator, that you ask someone to come to church with you if they currently are not attending church anywhere. Reveal to others the Jesus who has made a difference in your life.

Jesus begins his life and also his ministry as a servant subjecting himself to someone who was lower than he was. This is a mark of a true leader and the characteristic of the God that we worship. Amen.