

“A Matter of Death and Life”

The Baptism of Our Lord, Rom. 6:1-11

This year two of Epiphany’s main themes are just one day apart. The Epiphany of our Lord, always January 6, celebrates the visit of the wise men from the east who followed the star to Bethlehem. It is often called the Gentile Christmas, an epiphany that reveals Christ as King and Savior of all. On the Sunday after the 6th, the church observes Our Lord’s Baptism. So in one day of our life we jump forward about 30 years in the life of Jesus.

Now you may recall that after King Herod’s scribes told the wise men where Jesus was born, the king used that information to try to have the baby killed. Just to make sure that he got Jesus, he murdered all the Bethlehem babies. Yet an angel had warned Joseph to escape and stay in Egypt until Herod’s death.

So Jesus is born, but soon faces the threat of death. He would later die at the hands of evil men, but in his time. Such was the sign that though wise men welcomed him, fools and scoundrels resisted him.

Jesus is now about 30 years old and has arrived at the Jordan River where John is baptizing sinners who repent of their sin. Jesus requests such a baptism, as if he were himself a sinner. More lethal to him than Herod could ever be, is the sin of the whole world of which he assumes personal ownership. The Father is pleased that He has come to become a sinner in the sinner’s place, for only then can he rightly take the sinners punishment on the cross.

But the Father will raise him from the dead never to die again. All punishment for sin has been paid once for all time, all sins, all people who will accept it by faith. It’s a matter of death and life.

Our baptism benefits us because by it, we participate in that same death and life. Paul tells us. *“We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”*

Unlike the baptism of Jesus, our baptism into Christ doesn’t make us sinners. Rather it washes us clean of all sin. Paul wrote in Corinthians that *Christ, who knew no sin, became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God.* We exchange sin for Christ’s purity and innocence—cleansed in water by the Spirit and acceptable to God.

We share in Christ’s death in baptism, but we also share in the His resurrection. We have a new life. This is indeed an epiphany, or revelation for us who often forget. Though we have a new life, free from the power of sin, we still live at times as if we were not free.

We revisit our sins in two ways: in action and in shame. First we forget that we get to make choices about whether we will yield again to temptation. The sad fact that we often don’t choose to resist by praying in time of temptation reveals our weakness and ongoing sinful nature.

Yet, even in such times, when we forget we are free, we are still free from the resulting shame of failing to live according to the Spirit. That doesn’t mean, as Paul wrote, that we have a license to hold a casual disregard for our sin. Truly repentant do not willfully sin and arrogantly claim grace as if God owed it to us. God is no fool and his love will not be mocked.

Rather we can have the confidently contrite attitude Paul expresses in the next chapter. He doesn’t do the good he wants, and genuinely hates that he doesn’t. He also hates that he does the evil he doesn’t want. Yet he rejoices that Christ has still set him free from shame and he can stand forgiven before His Lord.

All this is ours in baptism, if we will own it, keep it, and nourish it with God’s Word and the Sacrament. There we follow Christ in death to sin. Since he cannot die anymore, we who die to sin in baptism cannot die either. We live a new life.

Is this available for everyone? Yes. Such an universally observable sign as a star in the night sky told the wise men that Jesus came for them too. Likewise, common water, accessible all over the world, and the spirit that hovers over all things, signals that God wants you to be saved. You are not left out. No one is. You are included. Everyone is.

Though you too will die physically, in baptism, you get to get that over with before that. You get to die to the power of sin and death and live a new life now and forevermore. It’s a matter of death and life. Life forever. Amen.

