

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
First Sunday after the Epiphany – Baptism of the Lord – Year C

RCL Readings – Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-22

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 89:1-29; Acts 10:34-38; Luke 3:15-22

Introduction. Epiphany is celebrated on the 6th of January on the Western Christian calendar. Epiphany comes from a Greek word meaning ‘showing forth, appearance or manifestation’. On the day of Epiphany, the Church celebrates the appearance or manifestation of the Messiah to the Gentiles. It is sometimes called Three Kings Day, as it commemorates the visit of the magi to Jesus in Bethlehem. The season between Christmas and Easter is known as the season of Epiphany.

Common Theme. Many of this week's readings revolve around water, baptism, and the baptism of Jesus. The baptism of the Lord is recorded in all four Gospels and is also commented on in many of the Epistles. By comparison, the birth of Jesus is recorded only in Matthew and Luke. The other common element throughout the readings is the voice that we hear from heaven. In all the Gospel accounts of the baptism of Jesus, we hear the voice of the Lord.

Isaiah 43:1-7. One of the most common messages from heaven is ‘do not be afraid’. Fear is one of the biggest enemies of the Gospel. Fear does not hold back the Lord from doing his will. Instead being afraid often stops us from doing God’s will. In these words from the prophet Isaiah, God speaks to his people as the creator and redeemer. He commands his people not to fear, not because the world around them is one of security and safety but because the Lord has redeemed them. He is with them and they are his. Indeed, God says they will walk through fire and water – metaphors for trials and tribulations – and yet they are instructed not to fear. With the Lord’s help, this is something we can do. We don’t have to panic, but we do have to trust. The passage ends with Isaiah reminding us that we were created with a purpose, for the glory of God.

Psalm 29. When the Lord speaks, he does so in a variety of ways. Sometimes the voice of the Lord is found in the quiet stillness, and sometimes he is in the burning bush. In this psalm, David describes the strength and power of a storm and likens it to the voice of God. Some of the most powerful forces experienced by those in antiquity were forces of nature: earthquakes, thunderstorms and raging seas. Elemental nature was, and largely still is, completely out of the control of humans. David reminds us that the Lord is in control of creation. He describes God as King of creation with his power and authority connected to his word, the ‘voice of the Lord’. The voice of God is paralleled to the Lord himself and receives seven descriptions in this psalm. In verse 3, the voice of God sits over the waters, an allusion to the waters of creation. In verse 10 the voice is enthroned over the flood, which is the same word that describes the floodwaters of Noah. The Lord is in control during times of creation and destruction. While the power of God can indeed be a destructive force, the psalm ends with a quiet confidence that God’s strength is passed on to his people who are blessed with peace.

Acts 8:14-17. Prior to his ascension, Jesus had given final instructions that the Gospel was to be preached from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria until the ends of the earth. Following persecution in Jerusalem, the good news was indeed brought to the people of Samaria. The Samaritans practice to

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this day¹ an Abrahamic faith with its own version of the five books of Moses called the Samaritan Torah or Samaritan Pentateuch. It does have some textual differences to the Hebrew Bible, particularly moving the focus to Mount Gerizim as the holy mountain of God and not Jerusalem's Temple Mount. Samaritans and Jews had a strained relationship in the Second Temple Period and a disputed history. Second Kings 17:24-41 provides an account of the migration of peoples into Samaria after the Assyrian captivity of Israel who then adopted the Jewish religion. In the first century, after Jesus' resurrection, many Samaritans accepted the Gospel through the preaching of Philip and were baptised (Acts 8). Yet the text says they do not receive the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the Holy Spirit is received after baptism and sometimes before as seen in Acts 10 with the household of Cornelius. Acts 5:32 says the Holy Spirit is given to those who obey the Lord. We should not be so bold as to put the Holy Spirit into a box and formulate how or when he comes to people.

Luke 3:15-22. Several questions are raised by the account of the baptism of the Lord. First, why does Jesus need to be baptised? To answer this question we need to understand the ministry of John the Baptist. John's ministry occurs in the wilderness, the place of messianic expectation. Through John's preaching messianic expectation is reaching new heights. People ponder that perhaps John himself is the Messiah. John preaches a baptism of repentance, but – secondly – did Jesus really need to repent? This question reflects Christian thinking of the individual and his/her personal relationship to God. Jewish people think in terms of national relationship with God as well as their individual relationship. Israel as a nation (not just individuals) needed to be pure, clean and ready for the Messiah. Jesus identifies as part of the nation of Israel and his baptism reflects that identity.² In this way the baptism of Jesus is not like our baptism. Unique to Luke's account, Jesus prays after being baptised and then is anointed by the Holy Spirit. Recall that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, he has grown in the Holy Spirit, and now he is anointed by the Holy Spirit. All three persons of the Godhead are now present as we hear the voice from heaven. At this point in the late Second Temple Period, the rabbis believed that God no longer spoke through prophets but that he did so through divine communication called a *bat kol*. The *bat kol* (literally 'daughter voice') spoke from heaven and quoted Scripture. Here the voice from heaven also quotes Scripture: 'You are my Son' comes from Psalm 2, and 'In whom I am well pleased' is from Isaiah 42. Jesus receives affirmation from his Father even before he has done anything. Jesus has yet to perform a miracle or declare a teaching, and the Father says he is well pleased with his Son. In his baptism, he identifies with Israel and with

¹ The Samaritans continue to exist as a people, with about 800 still living in the Holy Land, many near Mount Gerizim, still practicing their Torah-based religion. For a picture of modern Samaritan life, see Judith Fein, "The Last of the Good Samaritans," *BBC*, 29 August 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20180828-the-last-of-the-good-samaritans>; Patric Kingsley and Gabby Sobelman, "The World's Last Samaritans, Straddling the Israeli-Palestinian Divide," *The New York Times*, 22 August 2021, § World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/22/world/middleeast/samaritans-israeli-palestinian.html>; "Not Muslim, Not Jewish: Ancient Community in the West Bank Feels Increasingly Israeli," *Haaretz*, May 10, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-MAGAZINE-for-ancient-samaritan-community-a-new-test-of-loyalty-1.6075509>.

² We encounter this Jewish thinking in Daniel 9:4-5, where Daniel repented and confessed as part of the Jewish people although he personally had been faithful to God. Though we are individually saved, we are also part of the Church, which is called the Bride of Christ, and is also holy and prepared to receive the Messiah.

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us and in our baptism, we identify with him. The task for us is to learn to hear the voice of heaven and to be affirmed in our faith that God loved us before the foundation of the world.

ACNA Readings

Isaiah 42:1-9. This passage of Isaiah is most often known as the 'Servant Song' for its opening in which God addresses Israel to behold his servant. There are four servant songs in Isaiah, this being the first, in which the servant is the Messiah. The Hebrew word for servant is *eved* and can refer to a slave, an individual subject or vassal king, and sometimes even a tribute nation. Jesus is indeed God's servant, but not just any servant. He is the Servant! The Servant is chosen by the Lord, and God delights in him. We hear these words from the voice of heaven at the baptism of Jesus. There is more than simply being chosen by the Lord (some translations say 'elect of God'). Being chosen is also relational and being connected to the delight, love, and approval of God. God delights in those whom he chooses. We were chosen before the creation of the world, and this is a special relationship that we all have with the Lord.

Psalms 89:1-29. This psalm is attributed to Ethan the Ezrahite, who according to 1 Kings 4:31 is a contemporary of Solomon and also a man famous in Israel for his wisdom. This psalm begins by declaring praise to God for his mercies and faithfulness. One of the characteristics of the mercy and faithfulness of the Lord is their timeless quality in that they endure forever. Their timelessness is expressed in God's enduring covenant with the house of David, called the Davidic Covenant. In this psalm, the Davidic servant is called the chosen one. In verses 19-29 the psalmist describes the many blessings the Lord will bestow on the Davidic servant. The Lord will provide help and exaltation, anointing and strength, security from enemies and protection, all in the context of the steadfast love of God and his enduring faithfulness. Many of us can feel anxiety caused by the constant uncertainty in the world. It can be comforting to know that God remains solid, unchangeable and faithful to fulfil his word and his covenants. The reassurance we find in Psalm 89 is deepened when we read that God's love also 'stands firm forever' (v. 28). The Davidic Covenant with which this psalm is paired is unconditional. God's love for us and this world is likewise unconditional and endures forever.

Acts 10:34-38. Acts 10 introduces the watershed moment of Gentile inclusion into the Jesus movement. Prior to this, the mission of the early church had been restricted to the Jewish and Samaritan peoples. Peter now acknowledges the divine truth that Jesus is Lord of all and God shows no partiality in respect of peoples. This does not mean that the Jewish people have now become 'unchosen' as some theologies would proclaim. However, it does go counter to the prevailing Second Temple Period thinking in which a large segment of Jewish people thought that God certainly did show partiality towards the Jewish nation. Interestingly Peter provides a concise but profound summary of the life and ministry of Jesus: 'He went around doing good and healing all'. Perhaps the Church would be in a much better place if all the followers of Jesus did the same.

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About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is a deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and a teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master's program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.