

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

First Sunday after Epiphany – Year B

RCL Readings – Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 89:1-29 [20-29]; Acts 10:34-38; Mark 1:7-11

Seasonal Introduction. Epiphany of the Lord is celebrated on the 6th of January in the Western Christian calendar and the season continues until Ash Wednesday and Lent. Epiphany is a Greek word meaning 'showing forth, appearance, or manifestation'. During this season, the church celebrates the manifestation of the Messiah on earth between the time of His birth and preparation for His death and ascension. Epiphany itself remembers the visit of the Magi to Jesus in Bethlehem. And so, we see that the manifestation of the Messiah isn't just for the Jewish people but also for the Gentiles.¹ It continues with the Baptism of Jesus, His presentation at the Temple, and His transfiguration—all events with deep connections to Jewish life and history. Nonetheless, as promised in Isaiah 60,² when God manifests His light, it will reach all nations.³

Common Theme. The passages for this Sunday converge on a central theme: the manifestation of God through the creative voice, both at the dawn of the Universe and over all creation (Genesis 1:1-5 and Psalm 29) and the baptism of Jesus in John's baptism and unknown disciples in the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:4-11 and Acts 19). 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.

God manifested himself in multiple forms at Jesus' Baptism. First, Jesus manifested His presence not only among His people but also as one of His people. But it was the voice of the Lord during His baptism where God reveals Himself together with His son—just as the voice of

¹ The Epiphany of the Lord, sometimes called Three Kings Day, commemorates the visit of the Magi to Jesus in Bethlehem. While there were millions of Jews spread throughout the Roman Empire, from Alexandria to Asia Minor throughout the Mediterranean and all the way to Provence (France), the presence of Jews in the Parthian Empire had also continued from both the Assyrian and Babylonian diasporas. The Jewish communities in both Alexandria and Babylon were highly active in study and writing. After the fall of Israel and Judea to Rome, it was eventually the Babylonian community that took preeminence in Judaism for hundreds of years.

However, the Magi mentioned in Matthew 2 do not seem to know some of the common prophecies that elders of the Jews would know. Rather, they may have been in the tradition of the Chaldeans, a people that were known to hear the voice of God. We first read about the Chaldeans with Terah and Abram, who heard the voice of God. Daniel also speaks of this special people who were summoned amongst magicians, astrologers, and sorcerers to explain dreams. But while Chaldeans were known to hear the voice of God, they were also a people who often fought against God (Job 1:17; II Kings 24-25; Jeremiah; Habakkuk 1:6). Nonetheless, these visitors from the East were the first non-Jews to bear witness to the King of the Jews and the redeemer of the world.

² See Epiphany of the Lord, Isaiah 60:1-6

³ The Readings from both Acts 19 and 10 unfold the inclusion of the Gentiles.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
First Sunday after Epiphany – Year B

the Lord manifested God's character and purpose at Creation, the flood, or would be shown in Ephesus.

Hebraic Context. God has a lot to say and regularly made His opinions known in the Hebrew Bible. The Lord spoke directly to a few and, in His mercy, even spoke to those who didn't want to hear his voice, usually through His prophets. After the destruction of the Temple[s], the voice of God was not heard as often, nor with such clarity.⁴ However, Rabbinic Judaism taught that God was not aloof nor removed from His creation. God continued to communicate through, in Hebrew, a *Bat Kol*, "daughter of voice".⁵ The understanding and belief that God still spoke to His people—seen at Jesus' Baptism, on the mount of Transfiguration, and in the Temple, was recognized even after the period of the prophets.

Genesis 1:1-5. The opening verse of the Hebrew Bible contains seven words. The Jewish sages do not find this to be a coincidence, instead this concept of seven sets out the pattern for the entire universe. The following Creation Week will comprise seven days. (This will serve as the basis for a 7 day week acknowledged by all cultures today regardless of any Judea-Christian heritage.)⁶ Genesis is not only the beginning of the heavens and the earth, it is also the epiphany, or the revelatory manifestation, of God as a divine being. In the first verses of Genesis, we are introduced to the power of God through spoken declaration, His voice calls everything into being.⁷

The opening verse can be taken as both a summary and as mystery. The Hebrew word for God is the plural word 'Elohim' and yet the subsequent verb to 'create' is in the singular form. The

⁴ Although, there were still those who heard the voice of God in the time of Jesus, such as Simeon, as well as prophets and prophetesses such as John and Anna.

⁵ The tradition, stated in Pirkei Avot 6:2, "Every day, a *bat kol* goes out from the Mountain of Horeb to announce and say...", extends the belief, espoused by Rabbi Yochanan, that God sent the Torah to all the nations of the world in tongues of fire. Even though it isn't always written how in the Bible, our heroes of Scripture often come across Gentiles who already believe in God—Melchizedek, Jethro, Rahab, Ebed-Melech, etc, some of whom have heard directly from God while others saw God's power and might through Israel's testimony. When Elijah returned to the mountain of God, he heard a voice that was silent. Nonetheless, the silent voice communicated in perfect clarity. The *bat kol* is often related to matters where God makes a judgment, whether in Pirkei Avot 6:2 or in Eliezer ben Hurcanus' dispute found in Bava Metzia 59a-b.

⁶ One notable exception to the 7 day week, in the modern era, was the French Republican Calendar—used between 1793 to 1805 as a replacement for the Gregorian Calendar. The new French Calendar included a 10 day work week. This was not well received by the French society and only lasted 12 years.

⁷ The declarative power of the spoken word is the prerogative of God. That is, Genesis sets the tone that it is God's prerogative to declare things into being. That prerogative does not belong to man. Some modern Christian traditions consider themselves able to 'declare' things into being. This is not something we find Biblical characters doing and should be done with all caution, or not at all!

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

First Sunday after Epiphany – Year B

inconsistent Hebrew grammar itself presents the mystery⁸ that has kept Jewish and Christian scholars occupied for millennia. Genesis doesn't bother to argue the existence of God, instead it boldly presents Him as the first cause of everything.⁹ God's creative voice brings everything into existence. Initially, the environment of the universe is described as dark, watery, chaotic and void. The voice of the Lord, powerful and creative, brings order and light. There was no reason for God to bring everything into existence. With or without the Universe, God would still be God. In creating, God revealed some of His character. Creation is a selfless act as this genesis reveals God to be almighty, creative, ordered and yet at the same time loving, as God will have to sacrifice for His creation.

Psalm 29. In this Davidic song of praise, we are commanded to join with the heavenly beings in giving glory and honour to the Lord. David uses the term the 'Voice of the LORD' 7 times in this psalm. Reflective of the opening lines in Genesis and the creation week. David also uses God's personal name 'Yahweh' 18 times which is paired with his voice.

When the Lord speaks He does so through a variety of ways. God has, on occasion, spoken directly with people; at other times He communicates His desires in dreams and through the mouths of prophets. Angels have often been the messengers of the divine voice. Scripture continues to be the word of the Lord that can be heard everyday. Even nature itself can be the vehicle for how God speaks. 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 language in the psalm echo the Creation event of Genesis. 'The voice of the Lord is over the waters' (verse 3) resonates with the Spirit of God hovering over the depths at the Beginning. The voice of the Lord is paralleled with the Lord Himself as 'The Lord sits enthroned over the Flood' (verse 10). The Flood of Noah was a cataclysmic event of darkness and destruction, yet God ruled over that violent event. Many 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 all of His creation.

Acts 19:1-7. In Acts 18:24-28 we encounter Apollos, an important figure in the early believing communities of Asia Minor. He was an Alexandrian Jewish believer who was highly educated

⁸ See Footnote 18

⁹ Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scholars have all argued that everything that begins to exist must have a cause. If the universe began to exist it must have a cause. But there must also be something that never began to exist—something uncaused. That uncaused being is the Divine, called God. This argument, called the Kalam cosmological argument for the existence of God, is based on this ancient concept of the First Cause. (Named after an 11th Century Persian scholar, Al-Ghazali, who used *'Ilm al-Kalam*, the science of discourse, to make this argument.)

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

First Sunday after Epiphany – Year B

and an eloquent, gifted orator.¹⁰ Acts 18:25 suggests that he had encountered some disciples (perhaps disciples of John the Baptist) who had pointed him towards Jesus and instructed him in the ways of the Lord. Apollos was obviously persuaded as to the messiahship of Jesus and proclaimed this truth in the synagogue, yet he had not heard of Jesus' command to baptise in His name. At Ephesus, Apollos sat under the teaching of Priscilla and Aquila who instructed him further.

Acts 19 then opens by informing us that Apollos had moved onto Corinth.¹¹ While Apollos is away, Paul encounters some other unnamed disciples. The disciples are not identified as either Jewish or Greek and, while they believe in Jesus as the Messiah, they have not heard of the Holy Spirit.¹² Apparently, even after the resurrection, the disciples of John had continued his work of preparing the way of the Lord. These unnamed disciples¹³ had come to faith in Jesus through that message and had been baptized by John's disciples. Upon being baptized in the name of Jesus they received the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit deposits the gifts of prophecy and tongues on them.¹⁴

This passage shows two groups of people who use their 'voice' to proclaim the truth of the Messiah—even if the two groups derive that voice from different means. Apollos is skilled in the famed Alexandrian oratory style of Ptolemaic Egypt. This was something learnt through training and time, and he uses his voice powerfully and persuasively in the synagogues of Asia Minor. Conversely the gentile disciples of Ephesus receive the ability to speak with many 'voices' through the miraculous gifting of the Holy Spirit. We shouldn't rush to make dogmatic conclusions as to which 'voice' is better as only Apollos is mentioned again in the New Testament, while these unnamed disciples in Ephesus disappear from the pages of Scripture but have still joined with the family of God.

Mark 1:4-11. The first Sunday after the Epiphany is traditionally dedicated to the baptism of Jesus. As discussed before, the baptism of the Lord is mentioned in all 4 of the Gospels. It is an epiphany in every sense of the word. At the baptism God manifests Himself in His unity, John declares Jesus to be the 'Lamb of God', and Jesus' public ministry begins. This still begs the question though, why does Jesus need to be baptized in the first place?

¹⁰ Alexandria had the most famous library in the ancient world. It also had a large minority (upwards of 35%) of Jewish residents. Many famous scholars of both the Jewish and Greek worlds came out of Alexandria. However, in 38 CE, the Jewish synagogues and people were attacked, with thousands killed according to Philo, an eyewitness of the account.

¹¹ Paul notes the importance of the ministry of Apollos in 1 Corinthians 3:6.

¹² This suggests that they are, in fact, Gentiles as the Holy Spirit is a Jewish term occurring in both the Hebrew Scriptures and 2nd Temple period Jewish literature.

¹³ While their names aren't recorded, there are twelve of them, which reflects the number of inner twelve apostles of Jesus.

¹⁴ The Greek word 'glossa' γλῶσσα here simply means 'tongue' and could also refer to the common languages of man and not necessarily of angelic beings.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People First Sunday after Epiphany – Year B

Mark's Gospel does not contain any details of the childhood of Jesus. It begins with John preaching a baptism of repentance as he prepares the way for the Lord. The preaching of John was highly effective, his disciples continued to be active long after his martyrdom by Herod, not only in Judea and the Galilee, but as far as Greece and Asia Minor. Jesus identifies as part of the nation of Israel when He participates in the baptism of John.¹⁵

As Jesus emerges from the water of the Jordan, He immediately¹⁶ sees a vision of heaven being torn open¹⁷ and we hear the voice from Heaven, the *bat kol*. Through that tear, the Spirit descends on Jesus and we hear the voice of God. All three persons of the Trinity¹⁸ are now present. God displays His unity at the baptism of Jesus for all to see.

Hebraic Perspective. In Jewish tradition, the Bible is not only thought of as the 'Word of God' but also as Divine Language. The language of the Bible, its structure, the sounds that it makes—all these things are of extreme importance. There are no superfluous words or phrases in the Scriptures. Thus rabbis study the Scriptures with a fine tooth comb, often asking questions of the texts that we, as Christians, do not think to ask. For example, Genesis starts with the word 'bereshit' בְּרֵאשִׁית or 'In the beginning'. Thus the Holy Bible begins with the letter

¹⁵ Jesus identifies as part of the nation of Israel and His baptism reflects that identity. In this way, the baptism of Jesus is not like our baptism. We encounter this Jewish thinking in Daniel 9:4-5 and Nehemiah 1:4-11 where Daniel and Nehemiah confess as part of the Jewish people although they themselves have been faithful. Jesus is also part of humanity, in general, and a descendant of Israel, in particular, and so He will humble Himself and join in a baptism of repentance.

¹⁶ Mark uses the word *euthus*, 'immediately', for the first time in his gospel. He will make use of it regularly—more than 40 times.

¹⁷ The word to describe the heavens parting is *σχίζω schizo* and it refers to a violent tearing or rending. Something occurred at the baptism that shook heaven itself and it, like the veil in the temple, was torn apart.

¹⁸ While the word 'trinity' does not exist in the New Testament, it does describe something of the indescribable. Both Christians and Jews believe in only one God. If we say there is only one God, why then do we use the word 'trinity'? Skeptics of the Christian faith and doctrine of the Trinity will often point to the Sh'ma from Deuteronomy 6:4 as an example of the oneness of God. The Jewish sages have long wrestled with the divine nature of God and sought ways with fallible human language to proclaim truth. In the Jewish Prayer Book the Sh'ma is prayed, straight from the Scriptures of Deuteronomy 6:4. In Hebrew, we read and pray: שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד. This is so often translated 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one'. In the Jewish Prayer Book, page 13 of Siddur Avodat Israel it is translated: Hear O Israel, the Eternal our God is an Eternal unity. The word אֶחָד *'echad'* does not always mean the numeral number 'one'. Adam and Eve became אֶחָד when they became intimate, and when king David's army went out to war they went out as אֶחָד. The Jewish people have understood for a long time that the word אֶחָד, *'echad'*, carries with it the sense of unity, not just singularity.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

First Sunday after Epiphany – Year B

'bet' which is the second letter of the Alphabet.¹⁹ Every new year, the Rabbi's open up the Scripture, read the first word, and ask, "why?".

In Jewish tradition, even letters have meaning beyond their function as simply things that make up words. So the question is asked: Why does the Bible not start with the letter 'Aleph' which is the first letter of the Hebrew language and the letter that would be expected to begin everything? The answer, mysteriously, is that the Bible actually does begin with an Aleph—just that you can't see it. The concept is that there is an unseen spiritual Torah as well as the literal written Torah that can obviously be seen and read. Or, as Paul would put (using contemporary language from discussion like this), the letter of the Law and the Spirit of the Law. Which one is more important? Interestingly enough, many Rabbi's would argue that it's the one you can't see, that is, the Spirit of the Torah is more important.

ACNA Readings

Isaiah 42:1-9. This passage of Isaiah is most often known as the 'Servant Song' for its obvious opening in which God tells Israel to "behold my servant". There are four servant songs in Isaiah, this being the first.²⁰ The servant is chosen by the Lord and God delights in Him.²¹ We hear these words from the voice of heaven at the baptism of Jesus.²²

Even though a servant, *eved*, can refer to a slave, an individual subject, a vassal king, or even a tribute nation, there is something more here than simply being chosen (or the elect) for the servant of God. God is relational and connected to his chosen—this relationship delights God. God truly delights in those whom He chooses. We too 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, and begins by declaring praise to God for His mercies and faithfulness. One of the characteristics of the mercy and faithfulness of

¹⁹ The earliest paleo-Hebrew (or Northwest Semitic Phoenician) abecedary that was discovered, the Zayit Stone discovered in the hill country of Judah, was probably used to teach students the alphabet in the 10th century BCE. It does have some variance from the eventual layout of the Hebrew Alphabet, as seen in the later or even concurrent abecedaries written in Psalms (10; 25; 34; 37; 111; 112; and famously 119), Proverbs (31:10-31) and even Lamentation (1-4). Nonetheless, it maintains the first four letters in order, Alef, Bet, Gimel, and Daleth—only switching the hey and vav, zayin and het, and kaph and lamed.

²⁰ Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; and 52:13-53:12

²¹ The chosen one, בְּחִיר, refers to various people in Scripture, including: Moses, Saul, David and Israel.

²² Isaiah 42:1-4 is not self-evidently speaking of the promised Messiah, Jesus. However, Hebraic theology often uses the same words from multiple passages to weave together a message where a single passage may not do so. The voice of God declaring He is well pleased—delighted—in His son at Jesus' baptism and the connection between the chosen one בְּחִיר and, not just David, but his offspring who will be established forever (Psalm 89:3) are two passages we can weave together with Isaiah 42 may help inform our interpretation of who this servant is.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

First Sunday after Epiphany – Year B

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 the pressure of 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' (verse 28). The Davidic Covenant, that this psalm is paired with, 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 acknowledges, in his speech, the divine truth that Jesus is lord of all and God shows no partiality. 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 2nd Temple period thinking in which a large segment of Jewish people thought that God certainly did show partiality towards the Jewish nation.²³ Interestingly, Peter provides a concise and profound summary of the life and ministry of Jesus; 'He went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil'.²⁴ Perhaps the Church would be in a much better place if all the followers of Jesus did the same.

²³ Arguments, such as, "who is my neighbour" were very common in Jewish society as many argued that it was only those Jews who devoutly followed God who counted as a neighbour, while others argued that it was all people. Nonetheless, it is clear from writings and archaeology that Gentiles routinely joined the Jewish devout in the worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob during the 2nd Temple period.

²⁴ Satan constantly seeks to devour (I Peter 5:8), to bring people into rebellion against God (Genesis 3:2-6), and to cause our faith to fail (Luke 22:31-32).