Epiphany, Theophany, and the Baptism of Jesus

The Rev. Dr. Bill Doggett

January brings celebrations of some of the most public events of the life of Jesus. Holy Name Day on January first, which we used to call the Feast of the Circumcision, remembers Jesus being presented in the Temple by his parents to fulfill the rituals that name and claim a baby boy for Judaism. The Feast of the Epiphany on January sixth marks the end of the Christmas season, or which our primary narrative is the story of the Magi bringing their symbolic gifts to the two-year-old Jesus. It celebrates the manifestation of God in God’s own creation. And the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, on the first Sunday after Epiphany, remembers Jesus being baptized in the River Jordan by his Cousin John.

I want to talk a little about the history of the celebrations of Epiphany and the Baptism of our Lord through history, and especially how those celebrations are distinctly different in the Eastern and Western churches of Christendom - the Orthodox tradition of the East and the Catholic tradition of the West, of which the Episcopal Church is a part. But there are a few confusions that need to be cleared up so that we don’t end up comparing apples and oranges. Most of you know that the Orthodox churches keep a different calendar than the Western churches. But even here there is confusion about what we mean by calendar. There is the church calendar, which is only slightly different from East to West, and there is the secular calendar, which is where most of the differences lie.

Until 1582, there was no difference in secular calendars, but scholars in the West, noticing that the Julian calendar, so called because it had been reformed under Julius Caesar, had drifted away from the natural calendar, so that the equinoxes and solstices were ten days away from their traditional dates, while the traditional dates, rather than astronomical observations, were still used to calculate the date of Easter and the other moveable feasts. The problem was that the Julian calendar didn’t adequately correct for the difference between the length of the solar year and 365 days. Leap days every four years make most, but not all of the necessary correction. So Pope Gregory XIII, on the advice of astronomers, decreed that leap days would not be observed in years evenly divisible by 100, save in years also divisible by 400. This is why we observed leap year in 2000, but none was observed in 1900. Furthermore, to correct the shift that had happened since the establishment of the Julian calendar, Thursday, October 4, 1582 was followed by Friday.
Unfortunately for people who like things neat and tidy, not only did the Orthodox Churches refuse to follow the Pope’s edict, so did the Protestant nations in the West. Britain and her colonies didn’t adopt the change until 1752, by which time the error had increased to eleven days, which is why George Washington changed the date of his birthday from February 11 to February 22 when the correction was made, so that it would still be 365 days between birthdays. Alaska didn’t adopt the reformed calendar until it became a part of the United States in 1867, and Greece didn’t reform its calendar until 1923.

The Orthodox churches never accepted the Gregorian reform, but many of them have embraced a revised Julian calendar which has a different formula for compensation but will align with the Gregorian calendar until the year 2800. The Patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Greece, Cyprus, Romania, Poland, and Bulgaria use the revised Julian calendar, but for the sake of unity, all the Orthodox churches use the old Julian calendar to calculate the date of Easter. In recent ecumenical dialogues between East and West, the Orthodox have declared that reconciling the calendar and the date of Easter before fundamental theological issues are resolved between the churches would be an empty sign of a unity that has not yet been achieved. For Orthodox Churches that use the old Julian calendar, the difference between them and the reformed and Gregorian calendars is now thirteen days.

If that’s clear, I can move on to church calendars, but before I discuss differences, I want to spend a moment considering exactly what a church calendar is. At its root, a church calendar is not a cycle of seasons, or colors, or rituals; it is a cycle of readings. In the most fundamental sense, the lectionary is the calendar. The feasts, fasts, seasons, colors and ceremonies all arise from basic decisions about what to read on any given day. Sometimes those readings reflect historical events, such as the deaths of saints, or the presumed date of the Resurrection, but often the choice of readings reflects a fundamental theological position. The choice of the Christmas narrative in Luke’s gospel vs. the cosmological version of the Word becoming flesh in John’s gospel is a familiar example, but the choice of readings for Epiphany in East and West is what I am focused on here.

In the Western Church, with an orientation toward a triumphal Christology, the primary story about God’s manifestation to humankind, or epiphany, is the visitation of the Magi. The wise ones (scripture doesn’t actually say how many there were) who journey for two years from eastern lands to see the baby king are themselves a sign that Jesus kingship extends even to places beyond the reach of the Roman emperor. And their symbolic gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh proclaim Jesus to be king, priest and sovereign over death itself.
The Orthodox Church, more focused on both an incarnational Christology and the resolution of Trinitarian controversies, chose the story of the baptism of Jesus as its fundamental Epiphany story, the primary account of the manifestation of God to humankind. They made this choice because the account of Jesus’ baptism is the only place in all of scripture where all three persons of the Trinity are witnessed together: the voice of the Father, the Dove of the Holy Spirit, and the incarnate Son in the water of the river Jordan. This manifestation of God in Trinitarian fullness is so significant that the Orthodox don’t even call the feast the Epiphany, which means manifestation in a general sense. They call it the Feast of the Theophany, which means the “manifestation,” or more literally the “blazing forth” of God.

The celebration of that manifestation is a much older observation in East and West than the Christmas. The first mention of January 6 as one of two dates for Epiphany/Theophany observances that has come down to us is from Clement of Alexandria, writing in the late second century. By the fourth century that date had become fixed, and the readings associated with Epiphany/Theophany include many manifestations of God, including the birth and baptism of Jesus, and Jesus’ miracle at the marriage at Cana. The birth narrative gets separated from Epiphany in the fifth century, when Christmas becomes a separate feast.

In the Orthodox churches, the Theophany, observed on January 6 Julian (January 19, Gregorian), remains the biggest holy day of the winter calendar, third in the year after Easter and Pentecost. The Orthodox Theophany celebration is extremely elaborate, beginning with a forefeast on January first, followed by the Theophany Vigil on January fifth, after a day-long a strict fast of water only until the first star is observed, when a meal with wine and oil is served. After the meal, a series of services begins with the Service of the Royal Hours, followed by the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil, and then the Great Blessing of the Waters, which is performed twice: once at the fount and then again during the day of the feast at the nearest body of water. In Greece, a cross is thrown into the lake, river, or sea, and volunteers dive to recover it. In colder climates, a hole is chipped through the ice and the cross is dipped in the water three times. Theophany water is taken home for people to bless themselves and their homes, and to drink. In the Orthodox tradition, Theophany water is different from holy water in that its very nature is changed and made incorrupt, according to the teaching of St. John Chrysostom. At the Theophany day service, baptisms are performed. After this service, the Priest will visit each of the houses of the members of the congregation and bless them with Theophany water. And Theophany is followed by an eight day festival, but the Saturday and Sunday services after Theophany have readings about temptation and perseverance that look forward to Lent.
In the Western churches our Epiphany observances, although festive, were never so elaborate. These days in many Episcopal churches, the Feast of the Epiphany is becoming less significant, because it seldom falls on a Sunday, and Western Christians are increasingly less inclined to celebrate weekday feasts. Some churches observe Epiphany the Sunday following, others mark it in a small way on the day, or else ignore it unless it falls on a Sunday. Consequently, the feast of the Baptism of our Lord, which falls on the first Sunday after the Epiphany, is gaining prominence by default as the major Sunday observance that ends Christmastide. In that way, there is a convergence between the practices of Eastern and Western Christianity which may give us more ground for future reconciliation.

Bill +
Welcome 2015! A whole New Year is ahead of us and we are looking forward to working with your children in our Sunday School program. Classes resume January 4th and we will continue with our “4th Sunday Fun” group activities each month. The older youth will also participate in the 10:30 worship service monthly. Our thanks to their enthusiasm and support.

December 2014 is now behind us and we have wonderful memories of our Christmas pageant, with thanks to Fr. Bill and Yvette Allen for organizing the program. Special thanks go out to our come-as-you-are volunteers and pageant participants: Connor Nanavaty and Jacob Sabonis (readers); Kali Nanavaty (soloist); Luke and Kendall Hackworth, Amber Peters, Whitney Winkler (instrumentalists); Jon Fader and the Sunday School singers. A job well done!

It was a joy to greet and chat with 15 former St. James’ Sunday School students who attended the later Christmas Eve service. They were “home for the holidays” from college, their jobs and the military. They even took the time to be photographed in front of the altar after worship. Our very best to this great group.

Please know that teacher volunteers are always welcomed to join this meaningful ministry. The curriculum, Living the Good News, is user friendly and encourages team teaching as well as term teaching. For information you may contact Joan Fader (faderj1@juno.com) or speak with one of the volunteers listed below.

With sincere thanks to our dedicated teacher volunteers:

Co-Directors: Yvette Allen, Betsy Davis, Joan Fader

Yvette Allen (Bible Stories for Preschoolers coordinator)
Betsy Davis (Kindergarten – 2nd Grades)
Robin Kaizer and Cathy Schell (3rd – 5th Grades)
Joan Fader and Peter Sabonis (Middle School-High School)
Jon Fader (Music) ~ Nancy Nanavaty (Group Activities)
St. James’ Nursery School News ...

It is the policy of St. James’ Nursery School to allow church members to register their children for new spots in our Two, Preschool Three, and Prekindergarten Four classes before registration is open to the public. All classes will now be held at our Main Street location! Completed applications with registration fees will be accepted in the Nursery School Office beginning at 9:00 AM on Friday, February 6. Please be aware that there will be limited openings. If we cannot place your child in your 1st choice, we will call you. The registration fee is $75.00 per child. To be eligible, church members must have been attending and pledging members for a minimum of one year prior to registration. Church members not meeting these criteria are welcome to register during general registration, beginning Monday, February 9 at 8:00 AM. Please call the office at 301-829-0014 for registration materials and to schedule a tour, and feel free to visit our website at www.stjamesmtairy.org

Start Date Information:
2 Year Old Classes - must be 2 on or before 9/1/15
Preschool 3 Year Old Classes - must be 3 on or before 9/1/15
Pre-K 4 Year Old Classes - must be 4 on or before 9/1/15

Parish Annual Meeting: January 25th

The Parish Annual Meeting will be held on Sunday morning, January 25. Details of the time of the meeting will be coming soon, but please plan to be there to conduct the necessary business of the parish. And please get your 2015 Giving Plans in soon so that we may confidently plan the budget for the coming year that will be presented at the Annual Meeting.
Thrift Shop News ...

ST. JAMES’ THRIFT SHOP

Tips for a GREAT 2015 ....

SAVE MONEY?
St. James’ Thrift Shop has many items that are NEW, or gently Used for a fraction of retail costs. You
don’t have to drive far, and the construction is OVER!

GET INVOLVED?
Set an example for those who are influenced by your actions. Friends & family, Co-workers, neighbors ...
Volunteer at St. James’ Thrift Shop!
It's for a good cause!
Everyone has a special talent ... What’s yours?

BE MORE ORGANIZED?
Remember us when you are de-cluttering your garage, basement, or attic! Please bring all
NEW or GENTLY USED items to
St. James’ Thrift Shop!
Help us in our mission to restore the lives of the people in the community that are in need! Don’t forget to
get your Tax deductible receipt!
Adult Forum Resumes ... 

The Adult Forum will return on January 18th and the topic will be Episcopalian 101. This will serve as Confirmation class for those getting ready for Confirmation in March and be a chance for anyone else to learn more about our church.

E-mail News ... 

Every Thursday we are sending out an e-mail with the header “This Week at St. James” that contains updates about the church and items of community interest. If you have not been receiving this e-mail, please check your junk mail folder, and mark the sender as safe. Our new e-mail addresses at the church all end with “@stjamesmtairy.org.”

Amazon Smile ... 

Did you know that AmazonSmile is a simple and automatic way for you to support St. James every time you shop at Amazon? Instead of logging on to Amazon.com, go to smile.amazon.com. Type in St James Episcopal Church (see lower right of page and do not use the apostrophe) – and click on search. Once you have selected St. James (there are over 90 St. James—look for Mount Airy MD), your charity selection will be remembered each time you shop and 0.5% of the purchase price from your eligible purchase will result in a donation to our church. Nothing else changes – you still have access to the same Amazon website and your account number remains the same. How simple can it be? Pick up an “About AmazonSmile” paper on the table in the Narthex for more information, select St. James for your donation...and start shopping!
News: Bishop Heather Cook

No doubt most of you have heard the terrible news about our Bishop Suffragan The Rt. Rev. Heather Cook hitting and killing bicyclist Tom Palermo with her car. It has been accurately reported that she initially left the accident scene and returned about twenty minutes later. This is a terrible tragedy that will have an effect on our diocese for quite some time to come.

Bishop Sutton has decided to delay his sabbatical, which was to have started on January first, and has placed Bishop Cook on administrative leave while the investigation into the events continues. The following statement was issued by Bishop Sutton:

"I am distressed to announce that Bishop Heather E. Cook was involved in a traffic accident Saturday afternoon, Dec 27, that resulted in the death of a bicyclist, Thomas Palermo, 41. Bishop Cook did not sustain any injuries. Together with the Diocese of Maryland, I express my deep sorrow over the death of the cyclist and offer my condolences to the victim's family. Please pray for Mr. Palermo, his family and Bishop Cook during this most difficult time. Please do not contact Bishop Cook directly, but feel free to send written notes to the Diocesan Center.

There is an ongoing police investigation into the accident. Several news agencies have reported this as a 'hit and run.' Bishop Cook did leave the scene initially, but returned after about 20 minutes to take responsibility for her actions.

Because the nature of the accident could result in criminal charges, I have placed Bishop Cook on administrative leave, effective immediately. I will meet shortly with the Standing Committee to discuss ways we can move forward. Also, I have decided to delay my sabbatical indefinitely to be pastorally present in this difficult time."

There has been some speculation in the press about what happened, especially in light of a DUI arrest that Bishop Cook had in 2010. For those of you who are wondering whether the diocesan search committee knew of this and considered it before submitting her name in nomination, they did, and the following statement was released by the Diocese:

"One of the core values of the Christian faith is forgiveness. We cannot preach forgiveness without practicing forgiveness and offering people opportunity for redemption.

As part of the search process, Bishop Cook fully disclosed the 2010 DUI for which charges were filed resulting in a 'probation before judgment.' After extensive discussion and discernment about the incident, and after further investigation, including extensive background check and psychological investigation, it was determined that this one mistake should not bar her for consideration as a leader.

Continued ...
We, too are all filled with questions for which there are still no answers, and we are all filled with anger, bitterness, pain and tears. Our thoughts and prayers right now are with Mr. Palermo, his family and friends, and the bicycling community. And, we continue to pray for Bishop Cook in this time of her tremendous grief and sorrow."

I would ask all of you to remember that neither we nor the press have any information about the accident yet other than what is in Bishop Sutton’s statement, and it is not yet the time for either judgment or forgiveness, but a time to hold everyone affected by this tragedy in prayer. If you would like to help Tom Palermo’s two young children, a fund has been set up which can be accessed at:


If you would rather not use the internet, contributions may be sent to:
Palermo Children’s Educational Trust
c/o Molloy Investment Group
Stifel Nicholas
One South St., 30th Floor, Baltimore, MD 21202
January Birthdays !!!

7 Jon Fader
8 Tyler McKeever
10 Coleen Davis
11 David Brice
   Keara Snyder
   Carla Kaufman
12 Kaley Henyon
15 Jacob Batdorff
   Summer Etzler
   Betty Poole
17 Margaret Neff
20 Patrick Barazotto
21 Aline Sautter
22 Jessica Etzler-Bahorich
   Louis Pfefferkorn
23 Leigh DiMisa
26 Joyce Beddow
27 Robin Winkler-Pickett
29 Joseph Hartung
30 Ryan Riel

January Wedding Anniversaries !!!

1/1/2005 Jim & Stacy Mullen
1/16/76 Stanley & Yvette Allen
1/20/83 Gary & Betty Poole

January Memorials:

In Memory Of...
Jim Crum, Mickey Sautter, Ruth Webb,
Greg Wolcott, Virginia Ludder and Jimmy Barger
on their January birthdays.