

1 Epiphany/Baptism of our Lord January 12, 2025 Epiphanies

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It did not happen on a Sunday. Nor did it happen in a church. But it was an epiphany, none-the-less. I read about it on a *Ted Lasso* fan group on Facebook. This group is comprised of fans from all over the world and all walks of life who, like me, enjoy the TV series that does so much more than entertain. In this group, people share not only what they like about the show, they also share observations, insights they might have missed the first or second time they watched it, and in the case of one person whose name I will not be sharing, they had an actual epiphany.

This person was watching the show for the first time, got all the way to the third and final season, and with only a few episodes left, stopped an episode before it was finished because what they saw not only made them angry, it infuriated them. It was a scene where one character forgave another who had painfully betrayed the main character, the team he coached, and everyone involved with the team including the players, coaches, staff, and owner. Instead of revenge, the team, owner, staff, and coaches forgave this character. And it was that choice to forgive instead of punish that infuriated the particular viewer who shared their experience on the social media group.

That intense anger was the beginning of an epiphany. The person went on to share they thought about why they had such an intense reaction to that episode and realized it was because they had never before in their life witnessed forgiveness. For them forgiveness was strangely foreign and deeply uncomfortable, so much so it triggered a fight or flight response. Once they identified the issue, they went back and watched the rest of the show. After watching how forgiveness played out, how it created better relationships and led to healing, the person realized that they wanted to be like that. They wrote they know they can't start at that level of forgiveness, but they want to start in small ways, because they want to be better. Then they wrote no matter how corny it sounds the show *Ted Lasso* is making them a better person.

That was a beautiful epiphany. And it reveals epiphanies don't always start with an emotionally pleasing high or with comfort or beauty. An epiphany, as defined in the *Dictionary of Theological Terms*, is "an appearance of the divine", and that is not only what happened to the *Ted Lasso* fan, it happened to Jesus in today's Gospel.

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Epiphany, a season that began back on January 6 when the church year celebrated the arrival of the magi who followed the star to find baby Jesus. Epiphany is a season the church year gives us to reflect on how the divine has appeared in scriptures to help us learn how to recognize when the divine appears in our lives.

That is why the first Sunday in Epiphany always commemorates Jesus' baptism. Biblical scholars tell us the event of Jesus' baptism is recorded in all four Gospels, which indicates it is an historical event that most likely happened. However, each Gospel describes it slightly differently, each with different details and highlights that fit the author's style and theology. But despite their differences, Jesus' baptism is remarkable and commemorated because it is an occasion when the divine made an appearance, one that helped Jesus realize it was time for him to leave what he knew and follow where God was calling him to go and do what God was calling him to do. In other words, it was time to begin his ministry.

This might be why the early church made baptism more than a ritual, they made it a sacrament. The church defines a sacrament – you can check this definition on page 857 in the *Book of Common Prayer* – as an "outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as a sure and certain means by which we receive that grace." That is a lot of church words that basically say a sacrament is something tangible that shares a deeper connection with Jesus and is a means of conveying God's grace. In baptism, for example, the outward and visible sign is water and the inward and spiritual grace is, as our prayer book defines it on page 858, "union with Christ in his death and resurrection, birth

into God's family the church, forgiveness of sins, and new life in the Holy Spirit." In other words, baptism is the beginning of a living that new resurrection life of Jesus. Our baptism unites us, not only with Jesus but with each other, and reminds us God's grace has the power to transcend the ways differences are used to divide us because one of the hallmarks of God's grace is forgiveness.

This brings us back to the person who got an epiphany watching *Ted Lasso*. What struck me about their experience was the part where they stated they could not recall ever witnessing much less experiencing forgiveness in their life. When I shared this with my husband, he said he could easily believe that. Because there is very little forgiveness in the world, in real life and in entertainment. And while that is true, it is also true that as persons who have been baptized, we are given the opportunity to help change that by practicing forgiveness.

Whenever I preach or teach about forgiveness, I always feel it necessary to remind us all forgiveness is not the same thing as perpetuating cycles of violence or any other kind of harm. It is unfortunate that the change of heart of both the forgiver and the person being forgiven like you can watch on *Ted Lasso* is rare. So rare that it doesn't even happen with all the relationships on that show. But forgiveness doesn't require that both parties participate. Forgiveness, some say, is the gift we give ourselves, because you can still forgive someone even if their behavior doesn't change or they are not sorry. You can forgive them without trying to force them to change to act like you want to. As was discussed in *Women of Matthias* a few days ago, when I dare say there might have been an epiphany or two for a few of us, we can't change others, what we can change is ourselves.

Yet, as the *Ted Lasso* fan's experience reveals, we never know when what we do or say will make an impression on someone else. Forgiving someone might not work out the way *you* want, but someone you might not be aware of could be watching you; watching what you do and what you say, and that might make them realize forgiveness is real and opens up a whole new way of living for them, one that embodies the grace of God. Such a realization might even become an epiphany – a way of God appearing to them.

Forgiveness is not the only way to embody God's grace. Since today we are commemorating Jesus' baptism, in a few minutes we will renew our baptismal vows instead of reciting the Nicene Creed. The renewal includes our beliefs, and it also reminds us of how we are to live those beliefs by what we do and say. What I appreciate about the renewal of baptismal vows is that even if or when we struggle with any of our core beliefs, we are reminded there are things we can do to help us through those struggles, and that God is always there to help.

Today as we renew our vows, I invite you to deeply pay attention to the words instead of simply reciting them. Think about what each of those words means, what they mean to you, how you may or may not have experienced or seen them in your life. If a word or phrase stands out to you more than the others, you might be about to have an epiphany. Not all epiphanies happen in religious settings, nor are they all as grand and dramatic as the one Jesus' had when he was praying in today's Gospel, or as emotional as the *Ted Lasso* fan's epiphany. Sometimes God appears in other places in our lives, in the simple or small, like a flower daring to bloom out of season, a song on the radio, a story someone shares, an apology, or a gift of a cup of coffee or tea, a scene in a movie or TV show, a paragraph in a book, or a word in the renewal of our baptismal vows. Any of these things can be a manifestation of God giving us a new awareness and calling us to a change, one that could, even without us even knowing it, shine the light of God's love in the world.