**Another Road (1/5/2025)**

Second Sunday after Christmas

WHITE

**John 1: (1-9), 10-18**

Today is Twelfth Night, an oft-overlooked celebration bringing an end to the 12 days of Christmas. In olden days, it was the last holiday hoorah marked with feasting and merriment. It was also believed to be bad luck if the holly and the ivy were taken down before Jan. 5.

Twelfth Night, also known as Epiphany Eve, is an important transitional time, shifting our focus from the birth to the life of Christ. The word “epiphany” comes from the Greek *epiphaneia*, meaning “appearance” or “manifestation.”

In many cultures, Epiphany is a feast day celebrated with great fanfare on Jan. 6, with gifts exchanged commemorating the ones the Magi presented to Jesus.

They were among the first to recognize the appearance of the Promised One as foretold in Hebrew scriptures. And after paying homage to the Christ Child, they returned to their homelands via another road. (The Magi were warned in a dream to do so, as Herod, the jealous and dangerous earthly ruler wanted to know the whereabouts of this new king.)

Christ’s appearance in our lives often does that — puts us on another road that we never could have imagined being on.

It is an uncertain road that requires faith. But it is on this road where we discover “darkness cannot overcome” the light of Christ that shines on our paths. For, as John’s gospel proclaims for us today, “his is the life that was the light of all people.”

This road, too, calls us to testify to that light. Just as John did.

No, not John from our gospel lesson, but another man named John who died in an accident in the prime of his life. At his funeral, the minister opened her homily with the words from John’s gospel.

*There was a man sent by God whose name was John. He was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.*

The minister then spoke how this young man led many to the light of Christ — inviting people to church, always making time to be there for a friend in need, even mentoring a child who had lost his way.

No, John was not the light, but he did his best to testify to it in the days he was given. He chose to walk on another road, always looking for Christ among us.

It’s time for us now to step onto another road this year. It’s time to see, embrace and testify to that light in our world.

For there was a person sent by God whose name was …

*Loving and gracious God may the light of Your Son, Jesus, shine brightly on the paths You are calling us to step onto this year. May our words and actions testify to Your glory that is all around. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**Affirmed by Love (1/12/2025)**

Baptism of the Lord

First Sunday after Epiphany

**GREEN**

**Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

The teen waded into the cold lake. With words of being joined with Christ and the community of believers through the waters of baptism, under she went — emerging seconds later with the most radiant smile anyone had ever seen.

Her father captured that smile, memorializing the day with a photo in a frame that was inscribed with the words God spoke at Jesus’ baptism, “This is my beloved.”

Now, in a shoebox apartment with a toddler getting into mischief and overdue bills piling up on the kitchen counter, the girl with the once radiant smile, wondered where it all went wrong.

Tired and defeated, she sat on the couch, staring at the wall of pictures before her. It was then she spotted her younger self staring back at her with a smile that time had forgotten.

She shifted her gaze to the words on the frame. Only this time what she heard in her heart was a whisper, “You are STILL my beloved.” Just then she did something strange. She smiled — radiantly — remembering who was still holding her.

Today is the Baptism of Our Lord Sunday. It is a day that follows the celebration of Epiphany, underscoring the season of Christ appearing to us, revealing the love he has for us and the hope that is found when we clasp our hand in his.

Here, in Luke’s gospel, Jesus is recognized as God’s beloved, emerging from his baptism in the Jordan River to God’s voice thundering praises and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. It is a new beginning for Jesus. The start of his earthly ministry.

Baptism is an invitation to new life. But as we know, life’s newness — its bright prospects, endless possibilities and hopeful promises — can fade with time.

That is why on this day we remember not only Jesus’ baptism, but our own. For the very act of remembering that we have been claimed as God’s beloveds has the power to revive us once again.

It is said that on his most difficult days and times of great trials,16th century German Reformer, Martin Luther, would repeat these words: “I am baptized.” It was Luther’s way of reminding himself that no matter how off course life got, he was still held by a loving God who was always making all things new.

We all need that baptismal reminder.

So today, fill up a sink or a bowl with water. Dip, submerge, splash your hands in it. Then close your eyes and hear God whisper to you, “You are my child, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.” And as you do, may you find a radiant smile sweeping across your face.

*All-knowing and All-Loving God, may the cleansing waters of baptism wash over our lives, reviving hope for our tomorrows. May we hear Your voice this day reminding us that we are Your beloveds. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**Extravagant Sign (1/19/2025)**

Second Sunday after Epiphany

**GREEN**

**John 2:1-11**

Jesus is making his public debut as the Son of God, performing the first of seven recorded miracles in John’s gospel — turning 120 gallons of water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee.

Now it wasn’t the place or the time that Jesus had intended to display his divinity, but when your mother asks you to do something, as Mary did, you do it.

Mary’s insistence for Jesus to intervene was out of concern for their hosts, as running out of wine was a great embarrassment. It was expected for food and drink to be abundant for the many days of wedding feasting. (Weddings in Jesus’ time weren’t just a sit-down dinner or a morning brunch. They went on for days.)

John’s telling of this miracle, though, is not about saving face — or even just revealing the face of God in Jesus.

There’s a life-changing lesson for us today that is swishing around the six stone jars of water that are on the premises of the wedding banquet.

To start, John’s point of telling us there are six jars is important. Numbers have great significance in Jewish teachings. Seven, for example, represents perfection and completeness. Six, however, symbolizes imperfection. Jesus viewing those six jars as valuable for this miracle moment shows us how God sees all the things we deem unworthy as worthy.

There’s more. The water in those jars were not meant for drinking, but rather for ceremonial washing. It was customary for Jews to wash their hands and say a blessing before any meal that included bread. It would be considered disgusting to drink from those six jars.

Jesus, though, does the unthinkable. He disregards Jewish beliefs and traditions, turning the untouchable water into the best wine anyone has ever tasted. Had the guests known the water for ceremonial washing was used for the wine they were sipping; they would have been aghast. Yet those privy to this miracle were getting preview of what Jesus’ mission would be: To dismantle the systems that separate the clean from the unclean, that keep the downtrodden down and the oppressed oppress.

Would we have sipped that wine if we knew we it came from? Would we be willing to bend rules, break traditions, rid ourselves of rituals if it meant experiencing amazing water-into-wine miracles that God has for us?

There’s so much God wants to do in our lives, but first we need to let go of our assumptions of how life should be. Are you ready for a boundary-breaking, rule-busting God to turn your water into wine?

*God, forgive us for those times we are so set in our ways that we close our hearts to the new thing You want to do in our lives. Open us this day to all the beautiful and exciting possibilities. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**Good News, Good Ways (1/26/2025)**

Third Sunday after Epiphany

**GREEN**

**Luke 4:14-21**

The first inauguration of a United States president took place on April 30, 1789, with George Washington assuming the role of a fledgling nation’s commander in chief. His second inauguration was on March 4. It wouldn’t be until 1937 that the inauguration date would change to what we are familiar with today — Jan. 20.

On this day, the elected leader delivers an inauguration speech, casting a four-year vision for the country. The speech is a pivotal and defining moment for both leader and the people. (No pressure at all on the speech writers.)

Here in Luke’s gospel, we have Jesus’ defining moment — the divine inauguration speech — as he unrolls the scroll in his hometown synagogue and lays out God’s vision for humankind, as echoed in the words of the prophet Isaiah.

*Bring good news to the poor. Proclaim release to the captives. Recover the sight of the blind. Set the oppressed free.*

Retired Episcopal Bishop Gene Robinson of New Hampshire once said that if we ever wanted to know what being a follower of Jesus was about, all we had to do was listen to Jesus’ inaugural speech. For in it we learn that God’s vision comes with action points that we are all being asked to carry out.

When was the last time, though, we preached the good news?

No, not from a pulpit but in the sharing of stories of God’s redemption and restoration with friends and neighbors. And remember, preaching the good news doesn’t need words. The best sermon illustration is the life we live.

How have we proclaimed release to captives?

That is, when have we spoken a word of hope, providing someone a glimmer of freedom from whatever was imprisoning them?

When have we recovered the sight of the blind, pointing out the beautiful God moments that are all around? Or, set the oppressed free by finding the courage to speak for someone long silenced?

Two thousand years ago, Jesus inaugurated his ministry outlining a call to action — and it is still one of the most promising, hopeful, inspiring — and timely — inaugural speeches today.

May we once again share the vision for a new day dawning in our communities as we remember what Jesus’ ministry was about. May we ask ourselves this day: What is my role to play in shaping the destiny of God’s kingdom?

*Loving God, empower us to builders of Your Kingdom, where the good news is heard, sight is restored, and captives are freed. Help us remember that just as the Spirit of the Lord was upon Jesus, so it is with us this day and always. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*