

“Epiphany – A Biblical Perspective” (Mark 1:1–15)(1.17.21)

LET US PRAY. {humility}

INTRODUCTION:

All preachers make mistakes now and then. And, there are degrees of error to be sure. It could be a slip of the tongue, like someone saying Paul when they meant Peter. There could be a slight misstatement of fact. Or it may be a significant error in theology.

The last time I preached was three weeks ago and I referred to Jesus’ presentation at the Temple by his parents. I discovered a mistake when I did my weekly self-critique of the recorded sermon. I said that Jesus was presented at the Temple eight days after his birth. That would have been when he was circumcised. The scripture said Jesus was presented at the Temple after the “time of their purification,” which would have been at least 33 days according to Levitical ceremonial law.

Because I take preaching very seriously, and errors can undermine the credibility of the message; I took steps to correct the error right away by posting the correction on Facebook, on the Emmaus Faithlife group, and our website. In the subsequent two weeks, we watched a two part video message on Epiphany.

We were told that Jesus went up the Mount of Transfiguration with two of His disciples. But, Matthew 17:1 (ESV) tells us - And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. Saying two instead of three was probably a slip of the tongue.

We were told that the primary founder of Methodism, John Wesley, had his Aldersgate Experience, where his “heart was strangely warmed,” on Straight Street. In fact, it was on Aldersgate Street, which is why it became known as his Aldersgate Experience. Straight Street is in Damascus. Acts 9:10–11 (ESV)¹⁰ Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.”¹¹ And the Lord said to him, “Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying...”

Then we were told how having his heart strangely warmed changed John Wesley’s ministry. Some of this biographical information was wrong and some was mischaracterized. There is not sufficient time to specify those now.

My primary objection was in the way the scripture was handled and I don’t believe we were given a biblical perspective of it or Epiphany. Let us hear the scripture now. Last week, only verses 4-8 were shared, but I will explain why all 15 verses are one unit.

Mark 1:1–15 (NIV84) *John the Baptist Prepares the Way*

1 The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

² It is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way”—

³ “a voice of one calling in the desert,

‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’ ”

⁴ And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

¹² At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, ¹³ and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

¹⁴ After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵ “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”

The word of God for the people of God.

Title: **“Epiphany – A Biblical Perspective”**

BODY:

Notice that the first verse starts “The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ,” and the 15th verse ends with Jesus saying, “Repent and believe the good news!” The word for gospel and the word for good news is the same word in the original Greek text. In the fulfillment of time, Jesus, who is in fact THE good news, came to usher in the kingdom of God.

Also, John prepared the way for Jesus by preaching a baptism of repentance. And, Mark’s first recorded words of Jesus, have Him proclaiming, preaching, commanding, “Repent and believe in me.” These two factors make a strong case that to get a full picture of the Epiphany of God, we need to look at all the elements of these 15 verses as a unit.

How do we, as Methodists, faithfully develop our beliefs? In 1970, Albert Outler coined the term “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” It refers to the four “sources” on which Wesleyan theology is often constructed and defended: Scripture, reason, tradition and experience. Now, Scripture is primary and the other three elements must be subordinate to scripture.

Wesley wrote in *The Character of a Methodist* – “We believe the written word of God to be the only and sufficient rule both of Christian faith and practice;” To further substantiate the primacy of the Bible let me quote Wesley’s Sermon 107 that refers back to the beginning of Methodism. He is referring back to his days at Oxford when he, his brother Charles, and two others started meeting methodically to study, pray, and perform acts of piety.

“From the very beginning, from the time that four young men united together, each of them was *homo unius libri*,—“a man of one book.” God taught them all, to make his “word a lantern unto their feet, and a light in all their paths.” They had one, and only one, rule of judgment, with regard to all their tempers, words, and actions; namely, the oracles of God. They were one and all determined to be Bible-Christians. They were continually reproached for this very thing; some terming them, in derision, Bible-bigots; others, Bible-moths; feeding, they said, upon the Bible, as moths do upon cloth. And indeed, unto this day, it is their constant endeavor to think and speak as the oracles of God.”

Keith Drury in his book *With Unveiled Faces: Experience Intimacy with God through Spiritual Disciplines* wrote:

“The very best way to get to know God is to get to know Jesus. Jesus is the Revelation of God—He came to show us who God is. Thus, we Christians should especially focus our attention on the four Gospels, for there we find “God in Christ Jesus.” God did not send the Bible to die for our sins; He sent His Son, Jesus. We do not worship the Bible but Jesus Christ. The Word of God is Christ, but the Bible is our record of this Word. The Bible is precious to us. How would we know of Jesus Christ if we had no Scripture? All of Scripture is inspired—Leviticus, Ezra, Hebrews, and Jude, along with the Gospels, where we find the Revelation of God, Jesus. Thus we read the whole Bible, not just the Gospels. But as Christians (and as the Christian church), we make the Gospels central to our reading because the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ the Son of God are central to our faith. This is why we call ourselves *Christians*.”

Not once in the last two weeks were told to examine our Bibles to see God manifested. Does that make any sense? I am using “reason” now. Without the Holy inspired word of God, how would have the humanity and divinity of Jesus been revealed to us?

In fact, this is one of the reasons that we needed to read all 15 verses and not just 4-8. Verses 2 and 3 are quoting the Old Testament: Malachi and Isaiah, telling us that John the Baptist prepared the way for

Jesus. The whole Bible is history, his story, Jesus' story. The most prominent revelation of God was and is revealed in Jesus as depicted in our Bibles. The Gospel of John opens by telling us that the Word, Jesus, was with God and was God and became flesh to be God with us, Immanuel.

And, how did John the Baptist prepare the way for Jesus? By preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. My friends, I am telling you that if you want to prepare yourselves to see Jesus you must know and practice repentance. Mark emphasizes this.

But certainly, not only Mark. On the day of Pentecost when the Church was born, the Apostle Peter preached on the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

Acts 2:37–39 (ESV)

³⁷ Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" ³⁸ And Peter said to them, "**Repent and be baptized** every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."

John Wesley preached two sermons on Mark 1:15, saying a lot about repentance - John Wesley's Sermon 14 – The Repentance of Believers:

"It is generally supposed, that repentance and faith are only the gate of religion; that they are necessary only at the beginning of our Christian course, when we are setting out in the way to the kingdom. And this is undoubtedly true, that there is a repentance and a faith, which are, more especially, necessary at the beginning: a repentance, which is a conviction of our utter sinfulness, and guiltiness, and helplessness; and which precedes our receiving that kingdom of God, which, our Lord observes, is "within us;" and a faith, whereby we receive that kingdom, even "righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost."

But, notwithstanding this, there is also a repentance and a faith (taking the words in another sense, a sense not quite the same, nor yet entirely different) which are requisite after we have "believed the gospel;" yea, and in every subsequent stage of our Christian course, or we cannot "run the race which is set before us." And this repentance and faith are full as necessary, in order to our *continuance* and *growth* in grace, as the former faith and repentance were, in order to our *entering* into the kingdom of God.

Indeed when we first know this; when we first find the redemption in the blood of Jesus; when the love of God is first shed abroad in our hearts, and his kingdom set up therein; it is natural to suppose that we are no longer sinners, that all our sins are not only covered but destroyed. As we do not then feel any evil in our hearts, we readily imagine none is there. Nay, some well-meaning men have imagined this not only at that time, but ever after; having persuaded themselves, that when they were justified, they were entirely sanctified: yea, they have laid it down as a general rule, in spite of Scripture, reason, and experience.

These sincerely believe, and earnestly maintain, that all sin is destroyed when we are justified; and that there is no sin in the heart of a believer; but that it is altogether clean from that moment. But though we readily acknowledge, "he that believeth is born of God," and "he that is born of God doth not commit sin;" yet we cannot allow that he does not *feel* it from within: **it does not reign, but it does remain.** And a conviction of the sin which *remains* in our heart, is one great branch of the repentance we are now speaking of."

We were told more than once last week, "God loves you and God accepts you just the way you are."

There was no mention of the need of the forgiveness of sin. There was no mention of the need for repentance. The Bible says, in Romans 5:8 (ESV) "but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Let us apply reason here. Does that sound in harmony with "God accepts you just the way you are?"

Let me put it another way: if we are acceptable to God, why did Jesus have to die for our sins? Why did Jesus come at all? Why does Jesus say repent and believe the good news? The scriptures say that no one is good, no not one. The scriptures say that all of our righteousness is filthy rags before God. The scriptures say we were enemies of God. BUT and this is the GOOD NEWS, Romans 5:10 (NIV84) For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

We were told last week, that "after Jesus was baptized, He headed into the wilderness so that He could center himself and quiet himself to be fully ready for His ministry." This is not what we read here in Mark, the scripture from which he was preaching: ¹² At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, ¹³ and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

Other translations say that the Holy Spirit drove him or impelled Him to go. While we can assume that Jesus spent time in prayer with His heavenly Father, that is not what the scripture says. What is clear is that it was a time of trial. The other Gospels give more details. They tell us that Satan tempted Jesus through the misuse of scripture. Jesus resisted and rebuked Satan by accurately proclaiming God's word back to Satan.

Yes quiet time with God makes seeing God more likely. We were told to quiet our mind but wasn't that by putting it in neutral like we can do with a car? Were we told to pray? Our prayer life is extremely important. Charles Spurgeon, when asked, "What is more important: Prayer or Reading the Bible?" replied, "What is more important: Breathing in or Breathing out?"

Now, I confess that though I know it is important, my prayer-life is not what it should be. Yes, quieting our mind is hard. Random thoughts, stressful thoughts, work thoughts, sinful thoughts, and even unholy thoughts attempt to distract and derail our prayer-life. But the answer is not to go into neutral but follow the biblical mandate of the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:5 (NIV84), We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. I am afraid that there is too much passivity in too many Christians. Here are a few ways to take your thoughts captive and make them obedient to Christ. Openly rebuke the Devil: Satan you have no authority over my thoughts. I am a child of God; get behind me Satan in the name of Jesus. Also we have the guidance of Philippians 4:8 (NIV84) Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

You can deliberately meditate on Jesus coming and dying for you. Focus on your gratitude because God does love you and you are reconciled to Him. You can pray scripture back to God. We did that every day last year in the Emmaus Faithlife Group. Also, try singing to yourself a verse from one of your favorite hymns.

Yes, our spiritual experience of God should inform our faith. God can speak to us through our circumstances. Over the last two weeks, we heard several strong stories of God using other people to speak into someone's life. At the same time, this experience must be in alignment and consistent, subordinate to the guidance of scripture.

For instance, suppose you go to a fortune teller, Tarot card reader, and then read your horoscope. All three of them, astoundingly, tell you to take the same course of action. It seems like that would be a strong experience indicator. No! The scriptures forbid such practices.

Deuteronomy 18:10–12 (NIV84)

¹⁰ Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, ¹¹ or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. ¹² Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord, and because of these detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you.

CONCLUSION:

So far, we have looked at three segments of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, reason, and experience. We have not looked at tradition, which refers to Christian Tradition. Nowadays, if you asked people what were the most important Christian holidays, the responses might be fairly evenly split between Christmas and Easter.

Did you know that in the first 300 years of the Christian Church, they didn't celebrate Christmas? Even after it started, it did not hold the prominence of the three major Christian holidays: Easter, Pentecost, and Epiphany. Yes, the manifestation, the appearance of God in human history, is the most significant event in all of history. If we could separate ourselves from the secular celebration of Christmas, maybe we could more fully appreciate the birth and life of the Messiah.

¹⁰ As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Here, God was manifested as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Heaven was torn open, torn asunder. It was a manifestation of cosmic proportions. What a magnificent Epiphany. The world would never be the same again.

Has Jesus been manifested in you? Today, we received Carol into membership. We remembered our own baptism and renewed our profession of faith. Have you died with Christ, symbolized by immersion? Have you been raised with Christ, symbolized by being raised from the water?

¹⁴ After John [the Baptist] was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.

¹⁵ "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"
Amen and amen. Let us pray.