



## “No Ordinary Sunday: Voices from Heaven”

Baptism of Our Lord  
8:15 and 11:00 a.m. Sunday January 10, 2016  
The Reverend Dr. Jack M. Horner  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[Isaiah 43:1-7](#); [Psalm 29](#);  
[Acts 8:14-17](#); [Luke 3:15-17, 21-22](#)

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

So, where do the people go? A number of months ago, you might have heard me talk about a PEW report that talked about worship trends in the United States. It was a difficult report to read because it spoke about how church attendance is down across all denominations, but especially across mainline congregations.

So, where do the people go? Are they upset about a matter of faith, or perhaps of theology, or church practice? Maybe they got upset with something that happened in their congregation. Or they didn't like what the national church was doing. Maybe they went to a different church – a more conservative church in its beliefs. That's often what we think. But the fact is – that's not true. Yes, there are the occasional people who will go from one church to another, but for the vast majority, what the PEW report showed so very clearly is that they go nowhere. They just leave.

Why is that? There might be many reasons, but I would venture a guess that probably the biggest reason is that their faith and what they do and what happens on a Sunday doesn't connect with the rest of their week. They don't make the connections between the rituals that we do on a Sunday morning – the teachings, the prayers, the sermons, the readings – with what's going on in their daily life. Sunday becomes ordinary; just one more thing to do among others. And increasingly, people have chosen to do the other things.

It's good for the church, and for this congregation, that we celebrate the Season of Epiphany. It is just what the church needs today.

The word epiphany means to appear, to make known. And during this season we are going to be looking at all of those beautiful stories where God makes himself known through the person of Jesus Christ. The technical term for these appearances are theophanies. It is a Greek word – like so many of the words that we use in church – coming from two words; *theos*, “god,” and *phainein*, “to appear.”

There are many appearances of God in the Old Testament. We know the stories of God walking in the garden with Adam and Eve, the visitation to Abraham and Sarah by three visitors, Moses with the burning bush on Sinai, or God coming to Elijah in the wilderness in the sheer silence. These Theophanies show us God's awesome character. But we would be wrong if we thought it was just about God showing off – if it was just God showing all

of his power and his glory and his majesty. Because at the root of these appearances it is the desire of God, your creator, to make a relationship and a connection with his people.

At Jesus' baptism – surely that was one of those moments. “The people were waiting with expectation,” Luke tells us. They are waiting with expectation because they had not heard a word of the Lord in so long. They were drawn into the wilderness by this strange prophet, John. They wanted to hear and soak in everything that he had to say. And many of them gladly went into the waters to experience baptism for the repentance of their sins. But John understood very clearly that he was not the Theophany. He was not God appearing, but the one who was to come, Jesus, whose sandals he wouldn't even take off. And it is in that baptism, that first Theophany, where everything is set in motion. In Jesus' baptism, the voice breaks out from the heavens, “You are my beloved Son.” And now he will move from prayer to mission and ministry.

There's a beautiful complex sentence that is done here in Greek, with three actions that form the basis for this passage. “The heaven was opened,” “the Holy Spirit descended,” and “the voice came.” Baptism is a call to mission – to Christ's mission. And in baptism, for you and for me, it is a call similarly to us. We become Christ's possession. And that name that is spoken over us, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, becomes a part of our very identity – who you and I become as children of God. More than just a rite of initiation, we come away from baptism undergoing transformation and renewed allegiance to God through the repentance of our sins. Our normal lives are shaped and changed by that event as we are realigned for God's purposes. It is who God made you and I to be. That Word and Spirit that God gave Jesus, strengthened him and encouraged him to meet the needs of his ministry. A ministry of healing, of fighting evil, lifting up the poor, calling for justice, loving God and loving neighbor. The prophet Isaiah proclaimed “everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory.” Brothers and sisters, you were created for glory.

As we listen together as a community, and we live Jesus' life story through these seasons, we can see our story in His story, because it is that same word and spirit that fell upon you and me in Holy Baptism. God gives us that same strength and encouragement that we need for life; a life that will take us out into the world to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ in mission and in ministry. The Spirit descends to dwell in us and with us; giving us faith, calling us out.

In Holy Baptism the Father conveyed identity to his beloved Son. And in Holy Baptism, we are baptized in his name and made a part of his family. This is no ordinary Sunday for you and for me. The voices come from heaven and we are to live out our faith as Martin Luther said: “Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that a man could stake his life on it a thousand times.”

No ordinary Sunday to touch us, to give us his love and grace so that we can serve throughout the week.

Amen.

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