

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
First Sunday of Epiphany – Year A

RCL Readings – Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 89:1-29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

Introduction. On most given years, Epiphany falls midweek. This year it is a Friday, and because of our work schedules, most of us will not find ourselves in church to celebrate. According to the Western Christian calendar, Epiphany is celebrated on the 6th of January. *Epiphany* is from a Greek word meaning *showing forth, appearance* or *manifestation*. On this day the Church celebrates the appearance or manifestation of Messiah to the Gentiles. It is sometimes called Three Kings Day, as it commemorates the visit of the Magi to Jesus.

Common Theme. The first Sunday after the Epiphany typically centres around the baptism of Jesus. The baptism of Jesus is recorded in all three of the synoptic Gospels as a narrative event while the Gospel of John has John the Baptist allude to the baptism by declaring he saw the Spirit descend on Jesus as a dove (John 1:32). The baptism was accompanied by the voice from heaven, and our readings this week reflect on baptism and the message of the voice of God.

Isaiah 42:1-9. This passage of Isaiah is commonly known as the “Servant Song” for its opening in which God addresses Israel to behold his servant. While Isaiah addresses the Israelite nation to behold the chosen servant, the scope of redemption is universal. The servant will bring justice to the nations (Gentiles), not only to the Jewish people. There are four servant songs in Isaiah, this being the first, in which the servant is the Messiah. Verses 1-4 are quoted in part in Matthew 12:18-21, which references that these words of Isaiah are fulfilled in Jesus. The Hebrew word for servant is *eved* and can refer to a slave, an individual subject or vassal king, and sometimes even a tribute nation. Israel is called God’s servant in other parts of Scripture, however, in this context the servant is a special individual whom we identify as Jesus the Messiah. Jesus is indeed God’s servant, but not just any servant as He is “the Servant”! The prophesied servant is chosen by the Lord, and God delights in him. We hear these words from the voice of heaven at the baptism of Jesus. There is more involved than simply being chosen by the Lord (some translations say elect of God). Being chosen also has the sense of being in a relationship to the One who did the choosing. This relationship is connected to the delight, love and approval of God. God delights in those whom he chooses. We were chosen before the creation of the world, and this is a special relationship that we all have with the Lord.

Psalm 29. When the Lord speaks he does so through a variety of ways. He speaks through his angels, his prophets, his Scriptures, the history of the Israelite people, and his own voice. Sometimes the voice of the Lord is found in the quiet stillness and sometimes he is in the burning bush. In this psalm, David describes the strength and power of a storm and likens it to the voice of God. Some of the most powerful forces experienced by those in antiquity were the forces of nature such as earthquakes, thunderstorms, and raging seas. Elemental nature was, and largely still is, completely out of the control of humans, and when storms raged, it was often attributed to the titanic struggles among the gods or their wrath. David

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reminds us that it is the Lord who is in control of his creation. He describes God as the king of creation with his power and authority connected to his word, the “voice of the Lord”. The voice of God is paralleled to the Lord himself and receives seven descriptions in this psalm. In verse 3, the voice of God sits over the waters, an allusion to the waters of creation. In verse 10, the voice is enthroned over the flood, which is the same word that describes the flood waters of Noah. The Lord is in control during times of creation and destruction. While the power of God can indeed be a destructive force, the psalm ends with the quiet confidence that God’s strength is passed on to his people who are blessed with peace.

Acts 10:34-43. Acts chapter 10 introduces the watershed moment of Gentile inclusion into the Jesus movement. Prior to this, the mission of the early Church had been restricted to the Jewish and Samaritan peoples. Earlier in the chapter, an angel of the Lord had spoken to Cornelius – a Roman centurion – directing him to summon Peter who would tell him the good news. Interestingly, the angel did not share the gospel, though he certainly had Cornelius’ attention. Sharing the gospel of the Lord is something humans are tasked with. Peter now acknowledges the divine truth that Jesus is Lord of all and God shows no partiality in respect of peoples. This does not mean that the Jewish people have now become ‘unchosen’, as some theologies would proclaim. However, God’s lack of partiality does go counter to the prevailing Second Temple period thinking when a large segment of Jewish people thought that God certainly did show partiality towards the Jewish nation. Interestingly, Peter provides a concise, profound summary of the life and ministry of Jesus: “He went around doing good and healing all”. Perhaps the Church would be in a much better place if all the followers of Jesus did the same. Peter also reminds us that Jesus commanded us to preach to the people and bear witness that the One whom God has chosen is the judge of the living and the dead.

Matthew 3:13-17. John initially tried not to baptise Jesus, yet Jesus said that he had to in order to fulfil all righteousness. As Jesus had nothing to repent of, the question many might be asking is, why does Jesus do this? The majority of western culture only thinks of baptism as a baptism of repentance. At the time of Jesus, ritual immersions (baptisms) were a common practice, and they were done for a variety of reasons:

- Repentance could involve ritual immersion.
- A Gentile converting to Judaism would undergo a baptism.
- Also, baptism would remove impurity from a person so they might enter sacred spaces like the temple.

Jesus would have undergone ritual immersion (baptism) every time he entered the temple. Ritual impurity is not a sin, and people could become ritually impure simply through contact with an impure person or object. You would be ritually impure after intercourse (which is not a sin) and after a woman’s monthly period (also not a sin). God is holy, and he does not allow impurity to be around him. The way to remove the impurity was through the ritual immersion of living water. Israel as a nation had become

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impure, and John's preaching was a call to national repentance and national holiness so that the nation would be ready to welcome the Lord. Jesus is not repenting and being baptised for personal sin but rather is identifying with the Jewish people (of which he is a part) in their national purification in preparation for the Messiah. Following the baptism, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus. Recall that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, he has grown in the Holy Spirit, and now he is anointed by the Holy Spirit. All three persons of the Godhead are now present as we hear the voice from heaven. At this point in the late Second Temple Period, the Jewish sages believed that God no longer spoke through prophets, but that he spoke by means of divine communication called a *bat kol*. The *bat kol* (literally "daughter voice") spoke from heaven and quoted Scripture rather than giving a long monologue (like in Job). In the baptism story, the voice from heaven also quotes Scripture:

- 'You are my Son' comes from Psalm 2:7 and
- 'In whom I am well pleased' is from Isaiah 42:1.

Jesus receives affirmation from his Father even before he has done anything. Jesus has yet to perform a miracle or declare a teaching, and the Father says he is well pleased with his Son. In his baptism, Jesus identifies with Israel and with us, and in our baptism, we identify with him. The task for us is to learn to hear the voice of heaven and to be affirmed in our faith that God loved us before the foundation of the world.

ACNA Reading

Psalm 89:1-29. This psalm is attributed to Ethan the Ezrahite, who according to 1 Kings 4:31 is a contemporary of Solomon and also a man famous in Israel for his wisdom. This psalm begins by declaring praise to God for his mercies and faithfulness. One of the characteristics of the mercy and faithfulness of the Lord is their timeless quality; they endure forever. Their timelessness is expressed in God's enduring covenant with the house of David, called the Davidic Covenant. Here in this psalm, the Davidic servant is called the chosen one. In verses 19-29, the psalmist describes the many blessings the Lord will bestow on the Davidic servant. The Lord will provide help and exaltation, anointing and strength, security from enemies and protection, all in the context of the steadfast love of God and his enduring faithfulness. Many of us can feel the pressure of anxiety caused by the constant uncertainty in the world. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has disrupted global markets and the food supply and has heightened economic uncertainty. It can be comforting to know that God remains solid, unchangeable, and faithful to fulfil his word and his covenants. The reassurance we find in Psalm 89 is deepened when we read that God's love also "stands firm forever" (v. 28). The Davidic Covenant, which this psalm is paired with, is unconditional. God's love for us and this world is likewise unconditional and endures forever.

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About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is a deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and a teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master's program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.