

Third Sunday of Epiphany, January 23, 2011, Year A

**St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Associate Rector Scripture: Matt 3:13-17; John 1:29-41; Matt 4:12-23

***"Is It Any Wonder?"***

Last Sunday's Gospel lesson brought us to an area near Jericho, right by the River Jordan – the day after Jesus was baptized. If you remember from the prior week's Gospel (2 Sundays ago) – during His baptism, Jesus arose from the water. Matthew describes it this way: *"After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased."*" (Matthew 3:16-17) How absolutely remarkable - **the sky above Him was opened – and there, for the first time we are presented with the incredible presence of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.** WOW – you want to talk about signs! Fr. Ward has been preaching his series on "Signs" – and during that time three Gospel lessons have been pointing us to some incredible, undeniable signs that God has put before us. I believe that we need to reflect on those three Gospel lessons – today's and the prior two Sundays, which are John 1:29-41 and Matthew 3:13-17.

In Matthew 3:13-17 God the Father spoke and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove, above Jesus the Son, – and so the Holy Trinity affirmed the divinity of Jesus, the fact that He is God – in the very same water that parted so that the Ark of the Covenant could cross on "dry land" into the Promised Land – as told to us in Joshua chapter 3. I would ask you to please open your Pew Bibles to page 226, Joshua 3:14. Something significant is described: *"So when the people set out from their tents to cross the Jordan with the priests carrying the ark of the covenant before the people, and when those who carried the ark came into the Jordan, and the feet of the priests carrying the ark were dipped in the edge of the water (for the Jordan overflows all its banks all the days of harvest), the waters which were flowing down from above stood and rose up in one heap, a great distance away at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan; and those which were flowing down toward the sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off. So the people crossed opposite Jericho. And the priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firm on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan while all Israel crossed on dry ground, until all the nation had finished crossing the Jordan."* (Joshua 3:14-17) God was giving Israel, and us, a reminder that they were entering the Promised Land the same way they left slavery and Egypt (on dry ground) – by His sign, His miracle, and His power!

This event took place just north of the Dead Sea, across from Jericho in the very same water from which Elijah's chariot of fire would ascend into heaven; which Elisha parted with Elijah's mantle. *"And when he also had struck the waters, they were divided here and there; and Elisha crossed over."* (2 Kings 2:14) Three times God parted the waters – once at the Red Sea and twice at the Jordan River as a sign of His presence and power – covering His people. And now we read of John the Baptist giving further proclamation of Jesus' identity for all to hear – at a spot in the Jordan near Jericho. Only this time the waters weren't parted –but instead the heavens were – as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus -- and God the Father spoke. This was no ordinary place – and this as we well know, is no ordinary man! God the Father speaking was a sign that pointed directly to His Son, Jesus and God the Holy Spirit appeared as the sign of a dove which also pointed directly to Jesus. This is clear evidence that Jesus is the promised Messiah – God's anointed Son – who would carry our sins to the cross and teach us how to live.

Third Sunday of Epiphany, January 23, 2011, Year A

I find it remarkable that this week as I am blessed to share God's Word with you -- we simply cannot escape God's signs. Fr. Ward is in the middle of a sermon series on signs, and next week he'll be continuing it, but isn't it remarkable how God works? What does He give me to teach about? The Gospels and we see signs -- we cannot escape it! The Greek word in the New Testament for sign is σημεῖον (*semeion*) which not only means **sign** -- but it is also means **wonder** and is the word for **miracle**. The life and teachings of Jesus -- are filled with signs and miracles -- you can't miss them! And so I ask you - Is it any wonder? We encounter sign after sign -- all pointing to the fulfillment of prophecy, pointing to the identity of Jesus, and to God's most wonderful plan of salvation for those He loves -- which will ultimately point to the cross.

In John's Gospel-- John the Baptist proclaims Jesus to be the "Lamb of God." Many of us have heard and are familiar with the term "Lamb of God" -- and this is significant. John the Baptist would himself be a sign - pointing away from him and pointing towards Jesus -- specifically **as God's Lamb**. Right here -- he tells us not only who Jesus is -- but he tells us why Jesus must die such a sacrificial death on the cross -- for the sins of the whole world. That is a wonder in itself! Only God could pay this perfect price -- so that He could provide perfect justice -- and free us from our sins -- as the ultimate atonement.

John the Baptist simply testified to what he witnessed; to what he saw and heard -- that Jesus as the Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Most Jewish groups in Jesus' time believed that the Holy Spirit was not as active in prophetic inspiration as in the Old Testament. They felt that God had stopped speaking to them through His Holy Spirit when the last Old Testament prophets (Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi) died. For many of the people who listened to John's claim that through Jesus the Holy Spirit was present and that Jesus would be baptizing people with the Holy Spirit, it must mean that the Messiah had come or was near.

In last week's Gospel we read that two of John the Baptist's followers heard his announcement of Jesus as the Lamb of God -- and they left John and they followed Jesus. John's Gospel identifies one of them as Andrew -- the brother of Simon Peter -- and John, being John -- he humbly doesn't reveal that he is the other man. The connection is made and the groundwork is laid for the forming of the Twelve -- which continues in today's Gospel from Matthew.

Most people in the Galilee and surrounding regions depended on salted fish, wheat and barley for food. The typical fish from the Sea of Galilee were large carp and the fish would be dried, salted or pickled to preserve them. There were two main occupations in the area -- farmers and fishermen. Fishermen were an integral part of the economy of the Sea of Galilee and made a pretty good living, far better than the large numbers of farmers who worked the land throughout much of the Roman Empire. They would cast large nets made of rope or cords woven from flax, papyrus or hemp and as you can imagine -- they would reap a pretty fine wage, a nice payday with a large haul of fish. James and John, following Jesus' call on their lives, left behind a pretty good job. More than that, however, they suddenly left behind their father and their family business; knowing that it could bring upon them disdain and dishonor in their community. They felt a higher calling on their lives -- a sign they would become "fishers of men." Now that's what I call a sign!

In the beginning of today's Holy Gospel Matthew brings us a most important bit of information in the life and ministry of Jesus. From His account we learn that Jesus did not officially begin His public ministry until John the Baptist had been put in prison. Do you remember John's

words that *“After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.”* (John 1:30) John was physically born first – as you remember that his mother Elizabeth was pregnant when Mary came to visit - and the child John leapt in her womb at the presence of Our Lord Jesus in Mary’s womb. That in itself is a sign for us of Christ’s identity as the Messiah, but my point is that John’s words **“after me”** I believe signified that Jesus would begin His ministry **“after” John**. Following Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness – He went to the Galilee region – and met the beginning of the twelve disciples at Capernaum – where they lived and worked as fishermen. Matthew points to an important sign in the ministry of Jesus and the unfolding of God’s plan at the very beginning of today’s Gospel. *“This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: **“THE LAND OF ZEBULUN AND THE LAND OF NAPHTALI, BY THE WAY OF THE SEA, BEYOND THE JORDAN, GALILEE OF THE GENTILES-- “THE PEOPLE WHO WERE SITTING IN DARKNESS SAW A GREAT LIGHT, AND THOSE WHO WERE SITTING IN THE LAND AND SHADOW OF DEATH, UPON THEM A LIGHT DAWNED.”**”* (Mat 4:14-16) (Some insight about the Galilee region and Gentiles; there were three major cities – Tiberius on the western shore, Sepphoris, not far from Nazareth – where Jesus grew up, and near the eastern shore – the Decapolis – ten cities - all large centers of Gentiles.)

This passage serves as a most important transition, bringing Jesus to Galilee where His ministry is to have its formal beginning. Jesus has been prepared by His baptism in the Jordan and the temptation in the wilderness, and now the stage is fully set. Word comes that John has been arrested and therefore the work of the one who *“prepared the way of the Lord”* was complete. Jesus comes to Nazareth and to Capernaum beside the sea, which are so significant in their correspondence to the prophecy of Isaiah. Jesus begins to proclaim the presence of the kingdom of God by word and deed – as Matthew says *“teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people.”* (Matthew 4:23) John the Baptist was telling people to *“repent for the kingdom of God is near”* and I do believe that Jesus said the same thing – just look at today’s Gospel. Indeed – Jesus is a great light who appears to those who sit in darkness. Is it any wonder?

In closing, I want to share with you a most powerful example of fulfillment of prophecy, and a sign of the power of the Holy Spirit at work. As Jesus returned to the Galilee region after His baptism and the temptation by Satan – He went to Nazareth – where He grew up. Luke’s Gospel gives us the account of Jesus’ visit to the synagogue – and what transpired. It says *“And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written, **“THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD.”**”* And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, **“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”**” (Luke 4:17-21) Let me try to bring this a little closer to home! Could you imagine if this morning, our dear friend Jon Merrick stood up and said “you know all the words you heard this morning” “They are all about me! I am the fulfillment of the Gospels... I am back!” What would your reaction be? You’ve known him since he was growing up, you’ve seen him since he was a child. He’s Mike and Diane’s son! Well these were the words of the people of Nazareth: *“Isn’t this Joseph’s son?”* Or even *“Isn’t this Mary’s son?”* The people of Nazareth were stunned at this – oh, there might have been nervous laughter, but they were angry. Many wanted to physically push Jesus over the cliff at the edge

Third Sunday of Epiphany, January 23, 2011, Year A

of town. As proof positive that God's Holy Spirit is in charge – Jesus simply walked past them – for there was much more that needed to be done in the life and ministry of Jesus. There were three more years of work, of preaching, teaching, examples, of signs, of miracles and wonders that would culminate at the cross – and then at the empty tomb. Is it any wonder?