

**Washed for You**  
**January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016**

**Titus 3:4-7**  
**Epiphany 1 C**

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This past week was the start of the season of Epiphany. The day of Epiphany itself always falls on the same date, January 6<sup>th</sup>, exactly 12 days after Christmas. Following those twelve days of Christmas we celebrate the first recorded occasion of Gentiles worshipping Jesus and recognizing him as Lord and Savior. Sometime during the first two years of his life, while Mary and Joseph were still staying in Bethlehem, they were visited by a procession of Magi from the east who wanted to pay him the honor due to him. Again we celebrate this event on January 6<sup>th</sup>.

Why this event? What is the significance for us? Why should we care? Well because I'm guessing that most of you here are not literal descendants of Abraham. You're probably not of Jewish origin and at the time there was still the question of whom this Savior was for. After all, God had paid so much attention to the Jews that what he did hardly seemed to concern the other nations. Was this Savior just for them as well? If so, that would certainly be bad news for us. Just because you and I have known most of our lives that Jesus was a gift to us in addition to the Jews, let's not take for granted this event that reveals him as the Savior of all.

After all this idea of "being revealed" is exactly what Epiphany is about. I mean, what's an epiphany after all? It's some sort of revelation one has, sudden knowledge you did not have before, either gained intuitively or shown to you by someone else. And that's the point of the season with our Savior. We could not know him if God did not show him to us. Epiphany itself with the visit of the Magi shows us that Jesus is for you and me as much as he was for the children of Abraham. And now today, the first Sunday after Epiphany, we celebrate his baptism, in which he is revealed to the world at large to be the Messiah, the Christ; both titles which literally mean "the anointed one". It was at his baptism that God the Father made it plain to the world that this was someone special, set apart for the work he intended. And not just any person, but his only Son, whom he loved.

Again, this is an epiphany for us, in more ways than one. Jesus here begins his public ministry, officially inaugurated by his appointed forerunner and by the rest of the Trinity. His position as the Messiah, the Savior is fully confirmed to us through this action. But even more than that is the beauty of the fact that he allowed himself to be baptized. As the other gospel accounts tell us, John the Baptist objected to this initially. Jesus did not need a washing to be renewed and repent. If anything John needed it from Jesus. But even though Jesus did not personally need it, it was still necessary. This baptism is another tie, another link between ourselves and our substitute Lord. It is another way that he became you in every way necessary in order to save you.

St. Paul elaborates on the significance of this link and our own baptisms in our reading from Titus today: <read text: Titus 3:4-7>.

Notice how thoroughly this one point is emphasized throughout these few verses. What your God did for you was done out of kindness, out of love. It was not done because you did anything righteous, it was done purely out of mercy. The gift he pours out on you is given generously and our justification is purely by grace. Why do you suppose this emphasis is here? Why do you suppose scripture over and over again needs to keep repeating this truth to us? How many times do we need to be told that we are not good enough for God and that God has rescued us entirely by his work alone?

How many times are there? Because even as much as God tells us this truth, it doesn't ever seem to be enough. Look at all the religions of the world. How many depend on the grace of God entirely without our adding or contributing anything to merit salvation, however they might define it? None but Christianity. Now look at Christianity. For as many as still teach the Bible, who use it regularly, how many teach that salvation is entirely God's work alone without our contributing in the slightest? You would think it would be the vast minority, for as clearly as Scripture makes this point. But it's not, it's the overwhelming majority of those who call themselves Christian.

And what about those of us who do accept this teaching? We look at what God says here and nod our heads, yes that's true, we cannot save ourselves, God does all the work, I am saved by grace alone. We state this is our faith, but is that what we really think? Do you *really* think of yourself as worthless by nature in God's eyes? Do you *really* believe that God owes you nothing, I mean absolutely nothing? Do you still have pride to be injured or a sense of entitlement when it comes to anything in your earthly life; whether it's health or wealth or the love of others? Do you do your work for the Lord to keep him happy with you and "keep him off your back" or simply because the God who already loves you has asked you to do so?

Try as we might, we cannot bury that sinful ego as far as we want. We just cannot fully comprehend or even accept the depth of our own unworthiness or our need to be given absolutely everything from God by pure undeserved grace alone. Our own sinful stubbornness and pride in ourselves stands in the way of fully giving up on ourselves and trusting in God alone for everything. That incomplete trust, insisting that there is still something worthy about ourselves is an

insult to our God. Our impatience and anger with him in not giving us what we “deserve”, our fears that life isn’t going the right way, our insistence that we have to be in control of everything, that we always know best, these things call our God a liar at worst and incompetent at best.

So, where is the hope then? If we cannot fully accept even the most basic truth that our salvation is based on, how can we be saved? We are saved the same way we have always been, entirely by God’s work alone. Your fear, love and trust in God is incomplete? Of course it is, that’s why we need the Savior in the first place. We need saving because we fail at these things and thinking that our salvation depends on our performance here is falling back into the same sin of believing our salvation depends on us in any way!

But do you see how quickly and easily we fall back into thinking some part of this must be up to us? Do you see how easy it is to start looking to yourself for the solution and to then lose hope when we can’t find it there? The only hope that holds is found only in our God and his plan of salvation. Only in the Savior that would be our complete substitute in every way, born as one of us and baptized by water and the Spirit to show that he indeed goes in our place entirely.

We do need this truth repeated to us over and over, we do need to hear it from our God regularly. We need this constant refrain of “I love you,” from our Lord in our ears so that our faith can hold firm and trust can be deepened in all circumstances. By faith we are saved, entirely through the work of our Lord, this is an unchangeable fact. And yet our personal faith is something living and active that grows and shrinks based on how it is fed with the Word. The stronger it is, the greater our personal peace is in this life. The weaker we let it get by neglecting the Word, the more we are robbing ourselves of peace we could have and ultimately endangering ourselves by risking our faith dissipating entirely.

So we feed ourselves with the Word, we grow our faith through the power of God and we do this by returning daily to beginning of our faith and the start of Jesus’ work on our behalf; our baptism. This washing of water and the word, this pouring out of the Holy Spirit on us is where our faith begins for most of us and it is the divine promise that we are washed clean, connected by faith to the one who was washed in our place, Jesus Christ. He who was clean, who suffered in innocence for you and has made you like him before the Father. We begin with this reminder of what God does for us through our baptism and we let the love he has shown us, we let what he has done for us be our motivation for all we do going forward.

With this love, with this reminder of the grace of God in our own baptism, we do as Luther suggested and daily drown that sinful nature with its ego and its pride and its arrogance. With sorrow and repentance over the sins before we bury that sinful nature beneath the waters that have made us whole with our Lord. And having left it gasping for breath under that load we go forth each day to live who we are in God.

This is our call as God’s children, to live the life that we are now. In God’s eyes we have lived the life that Jesus lived in our place. To him you are holy. You have always trusted him. You have never questioned him. You have never been angry at him or anything he’s given you or asked of you. Your love for him is complete, your respect for him is total. So now, brothers and sisters, by the power of the Spirit given you, live that life.

In this new life you have been given, you can be free from the sinful nature and all the trouble it tries to cause you. In the old life you had, you were compelled to obey it, you couldn’t chose otherwise. Now...now you are free by the power of God to put it aside. You don’t need to be afraid anymore. Not afraid of the world, not afraid of politics or the news or what’s happening in your family or what’s happening to you. Your trust in the goodness and love of your Lord can overcome them all. You don’t need to be in control anymore. You don’t need to personally handle every situation and see that everything is done right for fear it won’t be done. You can trust that at the same time your Lord wants you to help, he also is capable of handling things without you. Not so you can be lazy, but that you needn’t be anxious. You don’t need to be angry anymore or worked up over anything. No, seriously. What could happen to you that God owes you better? Nothing. What could happen to you that can take away the promised inheritance of eternal life? Nothing. What disaster can you or anyone else cause that God will not work for the good of his people? Nothing. God is in control of your life, he allows what he allows for a reason. You cannot be angry at the events in your life without being angry at him. And we know his love, we know we have no reason to be angry or upset or anxious about anything when he is in control.

Instead, fill your life with the love your God has for you. Look to your Savior, beginning his march there from the River Jordan. Let him be revealed to you daily through the word of God. Cherish every opportunity to hear and study and learn from his word that your faith may be strengthened and your peace may increase. Look to the promise of your own baptism. Wash yourself daily in the love of your Lord. Banish all fear and doubt and anger and apprehension and live in the peace bought for you by the one who was washed for you. Amen.