

## Epiphany Powered by God's Word

✧ in the desert (vv.4-8)

✧ with the water (vv.9-11)

In the brilliant Name of God's Son whom He loves, dear children of the heavenly Father:

"Reality TV" has been around for a long time. And from the start people have questioned how real it really is. Remember, there were always hidden cameras. Someone would be walking down the street and start looking up the side of a tall building. Soon others would stop and stare, wondering, "What are you looking at?" People's curiosity overcomes their sense of self and they tend to forget how funny they look staring into the sky. Of course, the guy just walks away shaking his head while they wonder, "What was that all about?" Answer: Nothing! It's just the kind of strange reality you see in the city.

So what if John the Baptist had just set up a booth downtown Jerusalem? Would anyone have stopped to listen? Would he have looked like any other stranger in the big city? Would the religious leaders have kicked him out? Sent him to a leper colony since he dressed so strange? On the other hand, why would people leave the city to hear him? John had a job to do. None of this was his idea. It was not his plan. Everything had been predicted. God had a reason. It was time for God's own Son to be revealed, shining forth as God. Christ's **Epiphany** was totally **Powered by God's Word**, first...

✧ in the desert (vv.4-8)

All four Gospel accounts point back 700 years to the prophet Isaiah. He predicted the coming of John as the forerunner of Christ. God wanted everyone to know when His Son arrived and worship Him as their only Savior from the misery and guilt of sin. נְקִמָּו נְקִמָּו עַמִּי *"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."* (Isaiah 40:1-5 NIV84)

No one knows how to make a point like the LORD God Almighty! Listen! Hear the silence? Imagine centuries of prophets for Israel...then silence...400 years! (Malachi – Matthew) They know the Messiah, the Christ, is coming, but when? And what's this about a voice calling out in the wilderness? Some of you may remember John's parents were very old. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were way past child bearing age. Zechariah the priest didn't even believe the angel Gabriel that his son would *"go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah."* Zechariah could not speak until the baby's eighth day, then wrote, "His name is John." He praised God: *"You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."* (Luke 1:17,76-79 NIV84)

When John preached **God's Word** in the wilderness, city, town and countryside streamed out there to see this strange man dressed like Elijah of old. Everything about that prophet **in the desert** said, "Don't think about me; get this message!" *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."* (Matthew 3:2 NIV84) Repentance first is sorrow over sin. So Matthew and Luke report John said, *"You brood of*

*vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.*" He warned them not to rely on their Jewish heritage, just as we cannot rely on some church or denomination membership. God can still make members out of stones. *"The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."* (Luke 3:7f, 9 NIV84) True repentance first is sorry, but then also trusts God's forgiveness. Repentance follows up with good deeds, helpful works that bless your neighbor with your kindness and contentment.

In a way we're still going out there **in the desert** to hear John call us to repentance. It's embedded in our worship service to confess our sins publically and completely. We leave nothing out because we plead guilty of all sin. Just as you can't break a little piece of a window or partially pop a balloon, so every single sin breaks God's law completely. God puts us all alike under sin in order to have mercy on us all. (cf. Romans 11:32) So together we hear the pastor absolve us of our sin – fully and completely in Christ. We agree this is for everyone in our assembly by saying together, "Amen" – *solid, true*.

But how do you know? How could the people be sure that what John was telling them was true? How could John know who this Messiah would be? He would look like anyone else in the crowd. Remember this **Epiphany is Powered by God's Word**. All that power would come in a sign...

### ☆ **with the water (vv.9-11)**

Later on John would freely admit, *"I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'"* (John 1:33 NIV84) So John told the people, *"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."* (Matthew 3:11–12 NIV84)

"John is not describing a more powerful baptism, [but] a more powerful baptizer... 'His own strength is sufficient only to pour the water in baptism (apply the Means of Grace), but that Christ is able, by virtue of His own divine power, to confer even a baptism of the Spirit and a baptism of fire.' John could not. But Christ was and is able to work redemption itself, and, by virtue of his own divine power, to put the finishing touch on it by pouring out the Holy Spirit upon believers."<sup>1</sup>

Some theologians want to make two baptisms out of this as if there is a "Spirit baptism" and also a "water baptism." But the Holy Spirit unites Christ's Church with one baptism when He says through Paul, *"There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called— one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."* (Ephesians 4:4–6 NIV84) So it's heresy, false doctrine, a lie to speak of "Spirit" versus "water baptism." Listen carefully to Jesus' words. He tells us what He means. Jesus shows us a figurative meaning of baptism when He says, *"But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!"* (Luke 12:50 NIV84) Overflowed with the Holy Spirit happened on Pentecost for the Apostles (Acts 1:5) and continues for us in Word and sacraments. Flooded with fire is eternal judgement in hell.

What comfort there is for us **with the water** of our baptism! Listen to the Father's voice from heaven as the Holy Spirit comes down in the form of a dove and rests on the Lord's Christ: *"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."* And of all who also have His baptism and God's name on them He says, *"The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing."* (Zephaniah 3:17 NIV84) Let Christ shine in you – **Epiphany Powered by God's Word**. And let everyone see His kindness. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Baptism of John," by Pastor Joel Gawrisch, delivered at the St. Croix Pastoral Conference of the MN District (WELS), Shakopee, MN, 9/09/2003. Quoting J. Ylvisaker, *The Gospels*. (Augsburg Pub. House, Minneapolis, MN, 1932), p. 112. For *The Preacher's Apprentice (TPA)* sermon study or copies: [m.cordes@comast.net](mailto:m.cordes@comast.net). New Life Evangelical Lutheran Church You can also call: 651-484-1169. Hear the sermon at [www.wels.us/newlife](http://www.wels.us/newlife). 180 County Rd F - Shoreview, MN 55126