Today is the first Sunday during the season of Epiphany! Have a merry Epiphany, everyone!

But what is an epiphany? The urban dictionary states that an epiphany is a sudden realization of a great truth. Like bananas are a great source of potassium. Or, Americans will never embrace soccer. The rhyming dictionary states that Epiphany can be compared to Tiffany or Polyphony. I did not find either of these dictionaries helpful. In retrospect, they probably shouldn’t even be a part of good sermon preparation.

Better dictionaries and sermon preparation will tell you that Epiphany is a Christian festival held on January 6 in honor of the coming of the three kings to the infant Jesus or in the Eastern Church in commemoration of Jesus’ baptism. Like Advent or Christmas, it is the beginning of an entire season of particular Bible readings on Sunday that deal with “epiphanies” of who Christ is. Readings begin with either the arrival of the Magi or, like this year’s reading, with his baptism in which a voice from heaven declares, “You are my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.” This is followed by other passages in Jesus’ ministry that reveal who he is, culminating with the account of Jesus’ Transfiguration, in which the voice from heaven again declares, “This is my Son, my Chosen”

There was a Greek king in the second century BC who brutally persecuted the Jews. His name was Antiochus IV or Antiochus Epiphanes or “The manifestation of God.” He commanded the Jews to worship false gods, like himself, or die.

So the word Epiphany means manifestation and by implication manifestation of God. And since we Christians theologize from the ground up—believing that Jesus shows us what God is truly like—these epiphanies of Jesus are truly manifestations of God. So let’s think about Luke’s account of Jesus’ baptism.

You may have noticed that our reading skipped the tricky names of the kings and leaders at the beginning of the chapter just like God skipped those kings and leaders when he inaugurated his kingdom through John and Jesus. Luke’s gospel also bypasses the center of power in Jerusalem and begins in the wilderness. The wilderness in Jesus' day already had associations of opposition against Jerusalem and the temple leaders. The Jewish historian, Josephus, lists several radical prophets who led revolutionary crowds into the wilderness. As scholar Jon Levenson notes, the desert communicates a certain “primitive universalism … outside the control of government, in that it is a space free of any political authority
whosoever and of any organized governmental-cultic establishment.” John the Baptist was a wild and wooly guy because he identified with and embodied the wilderness itself.

Even today we know from the news that when wild and wooly men appear in the wilderness it generates a certain expectation and anticipation. And though some may desire to perpetually live in the wild, wild West, the wilderness is not a final destination but a place of transition and transformation along the way. It is a place of preparation. And I don’t just mean remembering to bring snacks—even though John the Baptist had his own wilderness snacks—both crunchy and sweet. So I won’t even mention it. No, the wilderness was a place of preparation and transition.

Unlike some preaching in the wilderness today, John’s preaching epitomized the prophetic tradition with its emphases on repentance and social justice. Baptism in the wilderness calls people out of social structures to a liminal place — a place that is betwixt and between — a place of transition — to undergo a rite of passage, to be renewed, and to be reconstituted as a new society.

But why was John telling Jews to be baptized? Jews didn’t need to convert; Jews were born into the covenant. It is thought by some that only Gentiles underwent baptism when converting. So this is like if you are already a Christian and people keep telling you, “You need to get saved!” I wish people would quit telling me that.

So Luke and John have our attention and create anticipation by emphasizing this kind of preparation.

But how should we understand this within the larger story of Luke’s good news? How can we read to discern the plot? If we look at the big picture, we notice that Luke has located Jesus' baptism right before his genealogy and right before the temptation. Why might he have done that? We all know that Matthew begins his gospel with the genealogy of Jesus. And we all know why. Right? He does that because he wants to grab you! How many times have you sat down to just read a few verses from Matthew and BOOM! You're immediately pulled into the story. Ezekias begat Manasses; and Manasses begat Amon; and Amon begat Whom? And you're stuck! Right? Matthew's opening has grabbed you once again. We've all been there before.

Actually, though our culture doesn’t necessarily resonate with this, most of the world for most of history has been interested in this sort of thing. When they meet a stranger they don’t ask, “What do you do?” They ask, “Who are your family? Tell me about your tribe. Tell me about your people.”

But why would Luke put Jesus’ genealogy right after his baptism? When we stand back and look at the big picture, we see that our epiphany passage is actually part of several stories that
emphasize Jesus’ solidarity and identification with all humanity: his baptism and his genealogy. Indeed, coming on the heels of the Christmas story, we hear these acts of solidarity as the climax of the incarnation and birth accounts. And Jesus is not simply identifying with a small segment of humanity. Luke relates a very inclusive genealogy underscoring Jesus’ solidarity with ALL humanity.

Unlike Matthew, Luke does not simply begin with Abraham and emphasize Jewish ancestors. And contrary to tradition, Jesus’ genealogy is not told chronologically but is related backward, all the way to Adam. Instead of repetitions of “begats,” we get repetitions of “son of.” Consequently, Luke frames Jesus’ genealogy with two references to “Son of God”—Jesus and Adam. Luke’s genealogy is universal, returning to the origins of all humanity rather than only to significant Jewish ancestors. Hence, Luke is emphasizing that Jesus' actions as Son of God shall not merely be on his own behalf, but in solidarity with all the people of God—indeed, with all humanity. Both the baptism and genealogy underscore this solidarity and prepare for the temptation scene where Jesus functions as humanity’s champion. He succeeds where God's people and all humankind have failed—the wilderness and the garden. Jesus has joined our team. His victory is our victory.

And all of this falls on the heels of Jesus’ baptism. On a fundamental level, baptism as a ritual symbolizes an act of solidarity and identification. For example, Paul’s discussion of Christian baptism in Romans follows this understanding. Christians participate in and benefit from Christ's work by solidarity and identification with him in baptism—the many with the one. Conversely, Jesus’ baptism in this context should be construed as an act of solidarity and identification as well—the one with the many. Luke shows us that all that Jesus shall accomplish through his life and ministry and death and resurrection has implications for all humanity.—because it began with an act of solidarity! Indeed, it begins with creative acts of solidarity—incarnation, birth, baptism, genealogy—all underscore this point. And since we as Christians theologize from the ground up, since we say that we understand God by looking at Jesus, we understand that this is also an epiphany of the Creator’s desire to join with creation, a manifestation of God’s longing to enter into and stand in solidarity with all peoples.

Jesus’ baptism is an act of solidarity, with the new community that God is creating in the wilderness, with all people, with all humanity, and with all creation. It is one point on the arc of the creator’s movement toward identification with creation. In the incarnation, by entering into creation, identifying with people, serving people, and laying down his life for them. These are all epiphanies of God’s character’s; they are manifestations of the very nature of God.

We know this is true of God because we see and hear this throughout Jesus’ ministry. From the synagogue in Nazareth we hear “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to bring the good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of the Lord’s favor.” We
hear it in Jesus’ self-description, “For the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” We hear this in the anticipation of his death, “No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.” Here and throughout the New Testament, we witness the distinct character of the God Jesus reveals, of the God we worship.

I think this casts an ironic light on recent events. You have no doubt heard the name Larycia Hawkins in the news lately. Larycia Hawkins, who is Associate Professor of History at Wheaton College has been recommended for termination because of an act of identification and solidarity with others by wearing the traditional Muslim hijab during the Advent season and for Facebook statements about the common ground that Christians and Muslims share. Prof. Hawkins stated that “This Advent I’m standing up with my Muslim neighbors out of my love for Jesus and the love I believe he had for all of the world.” According to her words, she has been dismissed for, quote “inviting people into a bigger narrative about embodied solidarity with Muslims, who are currently being maligned and mistreated for their religious devotion. I stand in religious solidarity with Muslims because they, like me, a Christian, are people of the book. And as Pope Francis stated last week, we worship the same God.”

Perhaps she would have been on safer ground if she had said we both worship the God of Abraham —but I doubt it. When she clarified her statement with precisely that kind of language it did not seem to matter to the powers that be. When a colleague of mine asked my take on the situation this week, I replied that this is yet another exercise in missing the point by Christians who believe the essence of faith is to patrol the borders and ensure that, regardless of context, all Christian discourse maintains an antiseptic purity and “clean room” status of doctrinal precision . . . in my humble and charitable opinion.

Christian ethicist David Gushee describes this as doctrinal Christianity. Doctrinal Christianity focuses primarily on believing, protecting, and proclaiming some version of traditional, orthodox Protestant Christianity. They tend to be most concerned about theological truth as THEY understand it. The main product of doctrinal Christians is theological declarations and the defense of theological boundaries. The great enemy of doctrinal Christians is anyone who appears to compromise any of these boundaries.

It is ironic—and tragic—then that, in trying to preserve and protect the distinct nature of God that Jesus reveals, they have a history of rejecting those who speak and act in accord with God’s character, with God’s desire to stand in solidarity with humanity —especially the persecuted and suffering. The kingdom that Jesus preached was not quite so fragile and antiseptic. The kingdom Jesus proclaimed did not adopt a defensive posture. We witness throughout the Gospels that Jesus physically touches lepers and the impure and even corpses to bestow new life.
One of the places we witness Jesus encountering those who patrolled the theological boundaries in his day would be at meals. In the Gospels, we read of numerous episodes in which Jesus is judged by his contemporaries because of his table practices. Indeed, there are an enormous number of references to Jesus eating and drinking in the Gospels. This is not because Jesus has a high metabolism, but because people in the first-century understood that eating and drinking were very theological. The table had become a focusing lens for one’s theology.

Hence, table fellowship in Jesus’ day had all kinds of symbolic import in terms of kinship, boundaries, and the presence of God. Consequently, there were elaborate rituals that attended meals, including the correct manner of the extension of invitations and the importance of seating arrangements. Meals and who you shared them with were of crucial theological significance to the sect of the Pharisees and to the community of Qumran. There are a great many parables and images of the kingdom that depict it as a meal or a banquet. Hence, meals were understood to say something about the nature of the kingdom of God and what it would look like. Pharisees, for example, would only eat with other Pharisees because they understood that all of the food was properly tithed, the food was prepared in a kosher kitchen, and all the other related purity rituals had been attended to. The Pharisees by their restrictive and exclusive table practices were demonstrating what they believed the kingdom would look like. It would be made up exclusively of people like themselves. Their meals were theological.

Jesus understood this and practiced a form of 'cultural criticism' and 'embodied solidarity' in his table practices. By eating with all kinds of people, Jesus was also saying something theological; he was saying something about the nature of the kingdom of God and about God’s nature itself. Jesus saw pharisaic table practices and did just the opposite, practicing a very open and inclusive form of table fellowship. He was modeling thereby a very different theological understanding of the kingdom. By practicing a very open table fellowship—constantly eating with the outcasts of society who were responding to the message of the kingdom—Jesus says something of what the kingdom looks like. “And they will come from east and west and from north and south, and will recline at the table in the kingdom of God. And behold, some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last.” (Luke 13:29-30) Jesus exploited the conventional wisdom of his day to make a powerful point on the nature of the kingdom of God. This is characteristic of Jesus entire life and ministry.

“It wasn’t a theological treatise,” Larycia Hawkins said. "It was simply a Facebook post inviting people into a bigger narrative about embodied solidarity.”

Yes, I believe that Christ brings a unique revelation, a unique manifestation of God’s character. And that precisely because of this, Jesus invites us not to patrol theological borders but to enter into this larger narrative. Jesus invites all to come in from riding the religious fences and
patrolling the theological borders to enter into this narrative, to embody this story. Yes, some may misunderstand or misconstrue or twist the story to mean something it really doesn’t. But for others, it will be a revelation, a manifestation of Christ, a true Epiphany of the very God we worship.

Sisters and brothers, Jesus invites us into his own larger narrative of embodied solidarity with those who are poor or suffer or are persecuted or mistreated or maligned. He invites us into this narrative because, as we read this morning, he has already entered into ours—and that realization can make all the difference.

May we go and do likewise.

Amen.