

SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
THE LORD BEGINS HIS WORK
Impact of His Work

Sunday after Epiphany
January 10, 2021
Revision C

GOSPEL: Matthew 4:12-17

EPISTLE: Ephesians 4:7-13

Most Western Churches use the Gospel accounts of the visit of the Magi as the Epiphany readings. The Lord's baptism is then used in the West as the reading for the 1st Sunday after Epiphany and today's Gospel reading becomes the reading for the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany. In the Eastern Church, the visit of the Magi is used for Christmas Day and the Lord's Baptism for Epiphany.

Epiphany celebrations began very early in the Eastern Church using the theme of the Lord's appearance (or Epiphany) at His baptism. This celebration included a Blessing of the Waters of Baptism. [For more discussion, see text from Epiphany.] In addition, the original Epiphany celebrations also celebrated the birth of Christ, which later became a separate Feast Day. When the Western Church began to celebrate Epiphany in the 4th Century, the theme of the Lord's appearance to the Gentiles (represented by the Magi) was chosen and did not include the Blessing of the Waters as in the East.

In the Eastern Church, today's Gospel lesson continues as the third in a series of three aspects of Epiphany. The first of the series centered on John the Baptist and Preparation for Baptism; the second centered on the Lord's Epiphany at His baptism; today's Gospel speaks about the Lord's Epiphany to His own people in Nazareth and Capernaum.

Today's Epistle lesson is sometimes used in the West for Pentecost Sunday, also called Whitsunday.

Background for the Gospel

The Gospel accounts in Matthew, Mark and Luke skip over a portion of Jesus' life between His baptism and temptation and His departure for Galilee to begin His work. Details of this omitted portion are found in John 1:35-3:36. To understand this, Matthew records Jesus leaving for Galilee after His temptation when He heard John the Baptist was imprisoned by Herod (Matthew 4:12, Mark 1:14). John records Jesus' trip to Cana in Galilee (John 2:1), then to Capernaum (John 2:12), then to Jerusalem for Passover (John 2:13) and finally into Judea near the Jordan to do some baptizing with John the Baptist (John 3:22ff) before heading North to Galilee (John 4:3). This is summarized in Table I. Today's Gospel lesson covers just the time He spent in Nazareth and Capernaum at the bottom of Table I.

Copyright © Mark Kern 2002

TABLE I
SEQUENCE OF EVENTS FOLLOWING JESUS' BAPTISM

EVENT	LOCATION	REFERENCE
Jesus' Baptism	Jordan River	Matthew 3:12-17 Mark 1:9-11 Luke 3:21-22 John 1:29-34
Tempted by Satan	Judean Wilderness	Matthew 4:1-11 Mark 1:12-13 Luke 4:1-13
Jesus calls some Disciples	Near Jordan River	John 1:35-51
Wedding Feast at Cana	Cana, Galilee	John 2:1-11
A few days in Capernaum	Capernaum, Galilee	John 2:12
Passover Feast	Jerusalem	John 2:13
Threw out money changers	Jerusalem	John 2:14-25
Met Nicodemus	Jerusalem	John 3:1-21
Baptized with Disciples	Judea	John 3:22-36
Left for Galilee on hearing about John's imprisonment		Matthew 4:12 Mark 1:14 Luke 4:14
Met Samaritan woman	Sychar	John 4:1-42
Arrival in Galilee	Cana, Galilee	John 4:43-54 Luke 4:14-15
Went to Nazareth	Nazareth, Galilee	Matthew 4:12-13 Mark 1:14 Luke 4:16-30
Went to Capernaum	Capernaum	Matthew 4:13-22 Mark 1:16-34 Luke 4:31-41

From "Harmony of the Gospels" Orthodox Study Bible, pp. 838-843.

Prior to arriving in Nazareth, Jesus stopped in at Cana (John 4:46) where He had changed the water into wine (John 2:1-11). While He was there a certain "royal¹ official" (perhaps a member of the family of Herod Antipas) came to Him from Capernaum requesting that Jesus come heal his son. Jesus sent him on his way back to Capernaum with word that his son was well (John 4:50); the royal official and his whole household believed (John 4:53). This was probably a large household with many servants. The word of this undoubtedly spread very rapidly because Jesus saw the results of it when He then went to Nazareth (Luke 4:31).

Later on, Luke tells us of Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, where she was one of the myrrh-bearing women (along with Mary Magdalene, the Virgin Mary, Mary and Martha of Bethany, Mary the wife of Cleopas, Susanna and Salome) and who, with the others, provided for

¹ The Greek word translated "royal official" is *basilikos* which is derived from the Greek word for king: *basileus*.

and financed the Lord's public ministry out of her possessions (Luke 8:3). Whether Chuza was the "royal official" of Capernaum (John 4:46) who believed along with his whole household (John 4:53), or whether he was one of the servants in the household, we don't know.

Gospel: Matthew 4:12-17, Mark 1:14-15, Luke 4:14-30

The Gospel lesson begins with Jesus leaving Judah to go to Galilee when He heard that John the Baptist had been put in prison. John had been bound and imprisoned by Herod Antipas because John had criticized Herod for the incest of marrying his brother Philip's wife (Matthew 14:3-4). Herod wanted to put John to death but feared the multitude because they counted John as a prophet (Matthew 14:5). John languished in prison for over a year before Herodias, Herod's wife, persuaded him to bring her John's head on a platter at Herod's birthday party (Matthew 14:6-11). Jesus, as God, knew what was going on here and quietly withdrew to Galilee so as to avoid being caught up in politics. He knew His time had not yet come.

John Chrysostom comments on this as follows: "Why does He depart? Again instructing us not to go to meet temptation but to give place and withdraw ourselves...He retires to Capernaum; at once fulfilling the prophesy regarding Naphtali and Zebulun seeing a great light (Isaiah 9:1-2)...By plotting against His forerunner (i.e. John) and casting him into prison, they thrust out Christ into Galilee of the Gentiles" (Homily XIV on Matthew 4).

Figures 1 and 2, on pages 500 and 501, are maps of Galilee that show the boundaries of Naphtali and Zebulun in 1200 BC versus Galilee in 30 AD. As one can see, the Galilean cities of Cana, Nazareth and Capernaum are within the regions given to Naphtali and Zebulun after the conquest. However they were part of the Northern Kingdom that was led into captivity by Assyria in the 8th Century BC. Galilee of the 1st Century had a mixed Jewish-Gentile population and Galileans were considered second-class citizens by the Jews of Judea (Edersheim, Sketches of Jewish Social Life, pp. 23-26, 30-33).

For example, the Pharisees ridiculed Nicodemus when he spoke in Jesus' defense: "Are you also from Galilee? Search and look for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee" (John 7:52). While the Pharisees were wrong that no prophet had come from Galilee, few prophets did. Jonah the son of Amittai was born in Gath-hepher, near Nazareth (2 Kings 14:25) and Nahum was also from Galilee according to Jerome (Unger, Bible Dictionary, p. 774).

The Gospel text, quoting Isaiah 9:1-2, refers to the Galileans as sitting in darkness (v.15) and sitting in the region and shadow of death (v.16). Could this be merely because few prophets had arisen from Galilee or is there something more sinister involved? To see what this darkness is, let us look at the reaction of three Galilean cities to the words and teaching of Christ.

On His return from Judea, Jesus went first to Cana, then to Nazareth, then to Capernaum (see Table I). His stay in Nazareth is covered in detail by Luke. He arrived in the Power of the Spirit (Luke 4:14), taught in their synagogues and was glorified by all (v.15). He even showed how the Scripture was fulfilled in His doing so (vv.16-21). But they also said, "Is this not Joseph's son?" and wanted Him to perform some miracles (vv.22-23) as He did at Capernaum. The miracles of Capernaum were done at a distance for the benefit of the royal official from Capernaum who sought Jesus out at Cana (John 4:46-54). Matthew comments later that, "He did not do many

mighty works there (in Nazareth) because of their unbelief” (Matthew 13:58). And this unbelief is the darkness and the shadow of death that Isaiah prophesied about. The darkness was so strong that all those in the synagogue ran Jesus out of town and tried to throw Him off a cliff (Luke 4:28-30). This is some very serious darkness!

As a result, Jesus largely abandoned His hometown of Nazareth in favor of Capernaum (Matthew 4:13), where Capernaum was later called “His own city” (Matthew 9:1). And He was able to do many more mighty works in Capernaum (Luke 4:31-41, 5:17-26, 7:1-10) than in Nazareth. While the residents of Capernaum were amazed (Luke 4:36), glorified God and were filled with fear (Luke 5:26), they did not repent as Jesus’ basic message called them to do (Matthew 4:17). He later stated that it would be more tolerable on Judgment Day for the people of Sodom than the people of Capernaum because of this. If similar miracles had been done in Sodom, Jesus said, the Sodomites would have repented and their city would have been spared (Matthew 11:23-24; compare Genesis 19:1-29). It sounds like the darkness in Capernaum was almost as bad as Nazareth. Similar for Chorazin and Bethsaida, which are close by to Capernaum.

Not all cities in Galilee were put into the category of Capernaum, Chorazin, Bethsaida and Nazareth by the Lord. Nain (about 6 miles SE of Nazareth), seems to have responded to Him quite well. After raising a widow’s only son from the dead, “fear came upon all, and they glorified God, saying, ‘A great prophet has risen up among us’ and ‘God has visited His people’ “(Luke 7:11-16).

Thus in Galilee of the Gentiles (Matthew 4:15), the people who sat in darkness saw a great light (v.16). And their reaction to the light varied. Nazareth tried to kill Him (Luke 4:28-30); Capernaum glorified God (Luke 5:26), but regarded His miracles as a circus attraction (John 4:48); Nain recognized God as visiting His people. There are similar reactions today by people who sit in darkness in cities all over the earth, including our own city. All that we as Christians can do is to be light as He is Light (Ephesians 5:8, 1 Thessalonians 5:5, 1 Peter 2:9, 2 Corinthians 4:6). This will expose darkness (Ephesians 5:13), and may very well generate a reaction from those who are blinded by the god of this age (2 Corinthians 4:4) similar to the reaction the Lord got when He made His Epiphany to His own.

Impact of Christ's Work

Revision C

Epistle: Ephesians 4:7-13

While the Gospel lesson addresses the beginning of Christ's Epiphany to His own, the Epistle lesson fast-forwards to describe a summary of the impact of His work.

Background to Ephesians

Paul wrote his Epistle to the Ephesians from house-arrest in Rome in about 62 AD. He had first met with and reasoned with Jews in the synagogue there in about 52 AD on his Second Missionary Journey (Acts 18:19). Although Paul did not stay there long in 52 AD (Acts 18:20), he left Aquila (of the Seventy) and his wife Priscilla there and promised to return (Acts 18:18-21). About 53 AD, Paul returned on his Third Missionary Journey and spent two years in Ephesus (Acts 19:8-10). At this time, the church took a separate direction distinct from the synagogue. Toward the end of his Third Missionary Journey in 57 AD, Paul had a very emotional farewell meeting (Acts 20:37-38) with the elders of the Church (Acts 20:17), knowing he may never return.

Ephesus had had a number of distinguished visitors over the years. The Apostle John and the Virgin Mary had gone there to escape the bloodbath of Herod (Agrippa) trying to please the Jews -- which resulted in the martyrdom of James the son of Zebedee and the imprisonment of Peter (Acts 12:1-4). That bloodbath began in 44 AD and ended with the death of Herod soon thereafter (Acts 12:2-23). Apollos (of the Seventy) also was in Ephesus in 53 AD and vigorously refuted the Jews showing from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 18:24-28).

After the death of the Virgin Mary in the mid 50's AD, the Apostle John returned to Ephesus and worked with a number of Churches in that area: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea (Revelation 2, 3). John may have been in the area when Paul wrote his Epistle.

Today's Epistle lesson speaks about the measure (or quantity) of Christ's gifts to men and how this was given after He made His Epiphany to the souls and spirits in hades. The context is Christ and the Church and our union with Christ.

Union with Christ

Paul had just encouraged the Ephesians to walk worthy of their calling (4:1) endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (4:3). He was referring to Christ and the Church as he did later (5:32) when he used the illustration of a husband and wife (5:22-33). Just as husband and wife become one flesh (5:28-31), so those in the Church are members of Christ's

Copyright © Mark Kern 2002

body (5:30), where Christ is the head (5:23). The Apostle John, who was probably working in the Ephesus area as Paul wrote this Epistle, taught the same “Union with Christ” using the analogy of a vine and its branches (John 15:1-8). The branches may carry all the fruit, but the vine and the root provide support and nourishment; and the vine is all one plant. In terms of union with Christ, there is one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one Faith, one baptism and one God and Father of all (4:4-6). For more discussion on this, see the 25th Sunday after Pentecost.

Christ’s Descent into Hell

As part of the Apostles’ Creed (drafted by the Twelve shortly after Pentecost) is the statement of the Faith that Christ descended into hell after His crucifixion. This is referred to in our Epistle lesson (vv.9-10), where hades (Greek) and sheol (Hebrew) had been understood as the lower parts of the earth. Peter stated that the Gospel had been preached even to the dead (1 Peter 4:6) and that the Lord made proclamation to the spirits that had been in prison since the days of Noah due to disobedience (1 Peter 3:19:20, 2 Peter 2:4).

These spirits may be identified with the “sons of God” (Genesis 6:2) who created the Nephilim who were the “mighty men who were of old, men of renown” (Genesis 6:4). These caused the wickedness of man to be so great on the earth that the Lord felt it necessary to destroy the earth with water (Genesis 6:5-7, 2 Peter 3:6). Goliath of Gath was later referred to as a descendant of the Nephilim (Numbers 13:33, Joshua 11:22, 1 Samuel 17:4). Currently these spirits in prison are restrained (2 Thessalonians 2:7-8); but there will come a time when they will be released again (Revelation 9:1-11).]

In descending into hell, the Lord overthrew death by His death (Colossians 2:15). As God, He cannot die; as man, He died in our place. As God in hades, our Epistle text states that He led captive a host of captives (v.8). The Church has interpreted this to mean that the Old Testament saints (Adam, Eve, etc.) who had been held captive in hades awaiting the Lord’s Epiphany were then released and taken to heaven by the Lord. For more discussion on this, see Holy Saturday.

Of the Lord’s descent into hell, Chrysostom said, “He descended into the lower parts of the earth (v.9) beyond which there are none other; and He ascended up far above all things (v.10) to that place, beyond which there is none other. This is to show His divine energy and supreme dominion. For indeed even of old had all things been filled (Homily xi on Ephesians 4).

The Measure of Christ’s Gift

Christ did not just lead captivity captive following His Epiphany in hades; He also gave gifts to men (v.8). This was part of the mystery the Lord revealed which for ages had been hidden in God (Ephesians 3:9). Something that’s easy to overlook is that heaven and earth aren’t the same anymore following the ascension. Among other things, Heaven now has a Man seated at the Right Hand of God (Hebrews 10:12); and those on earth in the Body of Christ sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:6). In revealing the mystery of the Body of Christ, the manifold Wisdom of God might be made known through the Church to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (Ephesians 3:10). This is a significant impact of His work.

In order to establish and promote this union, each one of us was given Grace according to the measure of Christ's gift to us (Ephesians 4:7). These gifts, such as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, etc., are for the equipping of the saints for the work of (literally) deaconing and for the building up of the Body of Christ (vv.11-12, 16). These gifts have their purposes listed in the following verses:

- That we all come to the Unity of the Faith and knowledge of the Son of God (v.13).
- That we all come to a Perfect Man (v.13). This is the New Man referred to elsewhere (Ephesians 2:15, 4:24).
- That we all come to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (v.13).
- That the truth of this might be preserved in spite of deceitful attempts to undo it (v.14).
- That the whole body might grow up in love with every part of the body doing its share, being joined and knit together with every joint supplying (vv.15-16).

This is the aim of the illustrations of the vine and the branches and the husband and wife: to give us a glimpse into some of the mysteries of God being worked out in our midst (Ephesians 1:9-10, 3:1-10).

John Chrysostom commented on this as follows:

...If then this or that man possesses any superiority in any spiritual gift, do not grieve at it, since his labor also is greater. He who had received five talents, had five required of him, whilst he who had received the two, brought only two, and yet received no less reward than the other. And therefore the Apostle here also encourages the hearer on the same ground, showing that gifts are bestowed not for the honor of one above another, but for the work of the Church, 'for the perfecting of the saints for the work of ministering to the building up of the body of Christ'.By this He shows that it is not of his own intrinsic merit that one has received more and another less, but that it is for the sake of others, as God Himself has measured it (Homily xi on Ephesians 4).

Thus the impact of the Lord's work was phenomenal. To the rulers of this world, it was totally unexpected. If they had known this would result, they wouldn't have crucified the Lord of Glory (1 Corinthians 2:8). The Old Testament Saints were raised from hades as a result of the Lord's work and have become a great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:2). "Because God had provided something better for us so that apart from us they should not be made perfect" (Hebrews 11:40). The "something better" is the Body of Christ where we are actually joined to the resurrected Christ.

Figure I
Galilee at the Time of Joshua

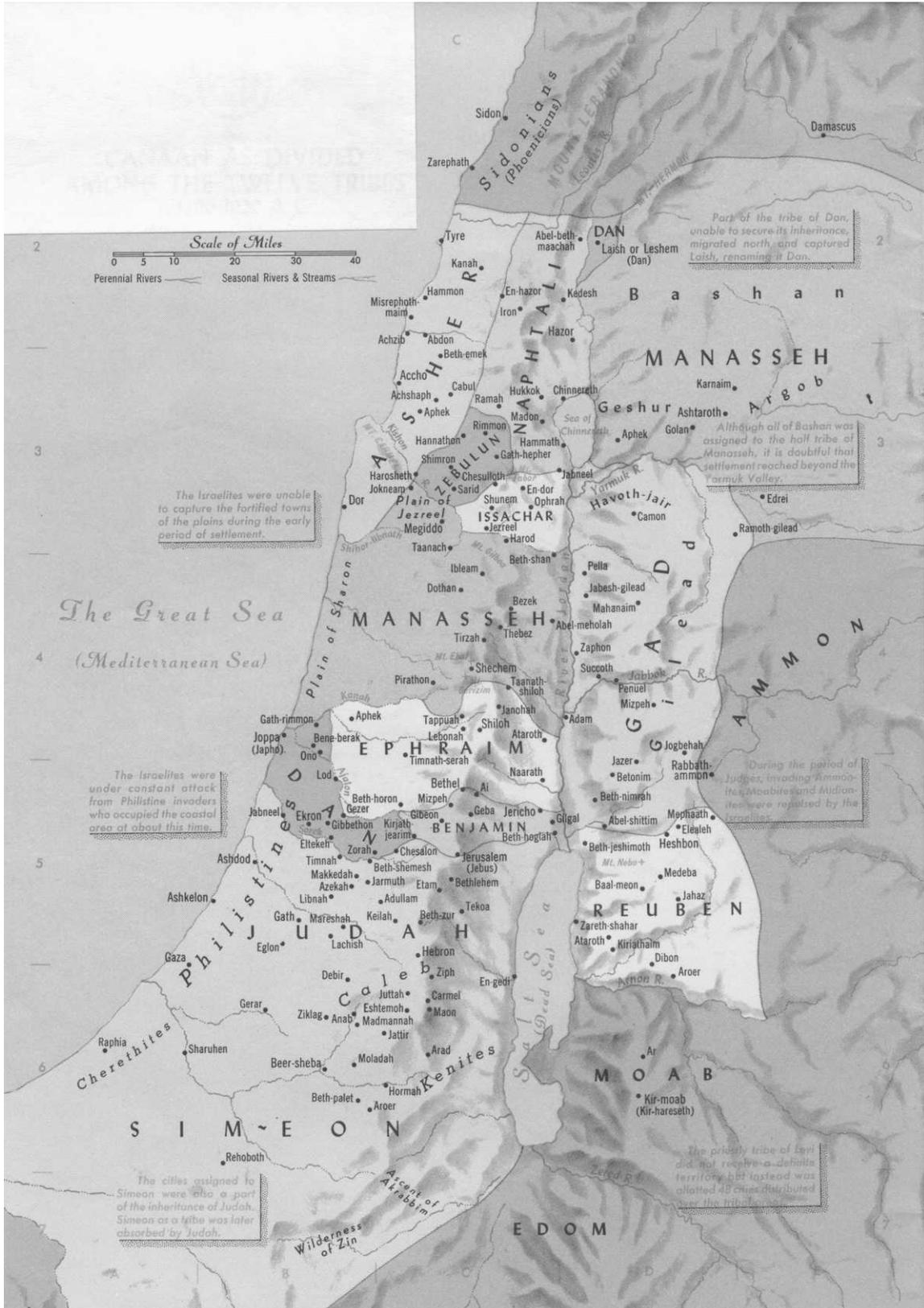


Figure II

Galilee at the Time of Jesus

