

Epiphany is the season when God *reveals something we were not prepared to see*.

In the church calendar, Epiphany is about *manifestation*—about God being revealed in ways that disrupt our assumptions. Today we celebrate the baptism of Jesus—his first adult action recorded across all the Gospels. At his baptism, heaven opens. The Spirit descends. God’s voice names love before Jesus has preached a sermon, healed a body, or challenged a system.

And yet, this season of Epiphany is also the season when the light of God’s love shines, not only on Christ, but also on us. And when that light comes, we often discover that the room we thought was neatly organized is actually full of assumptions, borders, and lines we have drawn without realizing it. Epiphany is like that. Today we hear another moment of revelation—this time not about *who Jesus is*, but about *who God includes*. And it unfolds through another baptism—one that does not so much change the person being baptized as it transforms the one doing the baptizing.

Peter is staying at the home of Simon the tanner in Joppa and goes up onto the roof porch to pray.

It is not the scheduled prayer time. But faithful people pray any time they feel a need to pray. He is hungry. Lunch is delayed. His body is empty and he falls into a trance.

The heavens open and a great sheet descends, filled with animals—four-footed creatures, birds, reptiles. The kind of creatures that faithful Jews have spent generations learning *not* to eat. The kind of animals that represent everything Peter has been taught to avoid in order to remain faithful.

And a voice says: “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” Peter does not hesitate in his response, “By no means, Lord! I have never eaten anything profane or unclean.” And then the voice speaks again: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

Then the sheet is taken back into heaven and Peter wakes up confused. This is not just about food. Peter knows that. This is about boundaries. About identity. About who is in and who is out. About who is clean enough for God. And while Peter is still trying to figure it out—while the vision is rattling around in his brain—there is a knock at the gate.

Standing outside are three men: two household servants and a Roman soldier. This detail is crucial. For Peter, Romans are not neutral foreigners. They are occupiers. They are oppressors. They are the ones who burned Jewish cities, enslaved families, and crucified thousands. Roman soldiers are the ones who nailed Jesus to a cross. Peter has every historical, emotional, and religious reason to fear them.

And then he hears the Spirit again, “Go with them. Go without hesitation. I have sent them.” Without hesitation. That may be the hardest command in the entire story. Peter invites them inside. He feeds them. He offers them hospitality. Already the walls are cracking. He allows himself to be changed before he understands why.

The next day, Peter travels to Caesarea with them and brings along several Jewish believers as witnesses.

Cornelius, a Roman centurion, is waiting. He has gathered his household and friends — people who are hungry for God, people who have been praying and watching and waiting. Inside the house, Peter says something astonishing: “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.”

This is Peter’s Epiphany. He is naming his own transformation out loud. And then—Acts 10:34—Peter speaks words that echo through the rest of Acts and into the life of the church and change everything for the followers of the ways of Christ – forever.

“Peter said, “I finally understand that God doesn’t show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

Peter doesn’t say “*I have been taught.*” Or “*I believe.*” Nor “*I have memorized the doctrine.*” But, “I truly believe – or I finally understand.” Or even, “I am learning to understand.” That is Epiphany.

We must be careful not to sentimentalize what Peter is saying because God’s non-partiality does not mean God is neutral or indifferent. It does not mean God is detached. It does not mean God loves vaguely and indiscriminately. Peter is not saying God is warm and indiscriminately nice. This idea of God’s non-partiality did not originate with Peter. In Scripture, non-partiality means something far more demanding. It is deeply connected to works of justice.

God does not evaluate human beings by the categories we use to rank, privilege, or exclude.

We read in Deuteronomy 10:17–19:

“For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the immigrant, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the immigrant for you were immigrants in the land of Egypt”

Biblical non-partiality is not passive acceptance. It is active justice. To say God shows no partiality means God **acts** on behalf of those most vulnerable to being overlooked by refusing systems that privilege some at the expense of others. So when Peter says, “I finally understand,” he is standing inside a long, justice-shaped tradition. His epiphany is undergirded by the God who defends the orphan, the widow, and the stranger.

Peter’s epiphany is not simply that Gentiles – ROMANS – are welcomed into the way of Christ, but that ALL people are welcome. To exclude “the other” from the love of God is a form of oppression.

Peter then proclaims Jesus—not as an abstract idea, but as a lived reality. He continues in verses 37- 43:

³⁶ This is the message of peace he sent to the Israelites by proclaiming the good news through Jesus Christ: He is Lord of all!

³⁷ You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism John preached.

³⁸ You know about Jesus of Nazareth, whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and endowed with

power. Jesus traveled around doing good and healing everyone oppressed by the devil because God was with him.

³⁹ We are witnesses of everything he did, both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree,

⁴⁰ but God raised him up on the third day and allowed him to be seen, ⁴¹ not by everyone but by us. We are witnesses whom God chose beforehand, who ate and drank with him after God raised him from the dead.

⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.

⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Jesus healed those who had been **powered down**. He restored dignity where systems had stripped it away. He lifted burdens imposed by religion, economics, and empire. This same word is used in the epistle of James to describe how the rich oppress the poor. “If you show partiality, you commit sin.” In James 2:9.

This means that we are not only people who have been oppressed and liberated by Jesus but that we are also people who are capable of oppressing—sometimes without fully realizing that we are doing so.

Non partiality is not an option if we want to be followers of Christ. No. It is a requirement. It is the shape of love. And the clearest model of this love is Jesus himself—the Jewish teacher who touched lepers, ate with sinners, welcomed children, challenged the powerful, and healed without asking who deserved it. Faithfulness without love is an oxymoron.

Peter finally understands that, by his excluding Gentiles from following the way of Christ, he has been *powering them down*. He has withheld the love of God and limited the reach of God’s redemptive power and grace to reach the Gentiles. By clinging to purity laws without mercy, he has participated in injustice.

And then—before Peter finishes preaching—the Holy Spirit descends on everyone there. We read further in Acts 10:45-46 that ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶ They heard them speaking in other languages and praising God.

Peter just responds to God’s Spirit and asks, ⁴⁷ “These people have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. Surely no one can stop them from being baptized with water, can they?” ⁴⁸ He directed that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

The insiders are stunned. Peter doesn’t get approval from the deacons nor permission from Jerusalem. He just baptizes these ROMANS. The ones who thought they understood how God works are forced to watch God work differently.

At the end of this account, we realize that this baptism does not just change Cornelius, it changes Peter and then later, the effects of this event reach even to us here today.

Today we remember Jesus' baptism. Yes, baptism is personal. Yes, it marks new life. Yes, we are blessed as we participate in it and we are welcomed into the family of faith.

But if we stop there, we miss half the meaning. It is not just about what you do when you're a teen who wants to make her family happy.

It is about how we decide to live on this great journey travelling the way of Christ. Baptism is taking our place in the functioning of God's kingdom. It is a public renunciation of the powerful of this world that would power people down ... Even if those powerful people are US.

And we can't stop the Spirit. The Spirit who shows no partiality. The Spirit who sees each person's heart and claims them as "beloved" – regardless of what WE think.

Epiphany does not end with understanding. It is not just about seeing Jesus more clearly. But it is about seeing EACH OTHER differently.

Peter did not lose his faith that day – likewise, he didn't stop occasionally making a mess of things – like he was apt to do. No. Peter did not abandon scripture or compromise "the Gospel". No. He finally understood.

May God grant us the same courage to let the Spirit disturb us. To cross lines we once defended. To be witness to and name injustice when we see it. To call out systems that power people down. To stop calling profane those whom God has called beloved.

That we may truly understand that God shows no partiality.

Amen and Amen.