

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Epiphany is all about the “Aha!” That is essentially what an epiphany is, right? It’s the special insight you receive, an understanding, a realization. It’s the little light bulb that cartoonists draw above their character.

Last Sunday, we read the story of the wise men. They had such an “aha” as they saw the star appear in the eastern sky. It announced the coming of the King of the Jews; that was their epiphany. And they followed it to the child Jesus where they worshipped Him.

We read also last Sunday of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River. It was another “aha.” Not only did Jesus see the descent of the Holy Spirit into Him, not only did Jesus hear the testimony of His Father, but also John the Baptist did, and it was an epiphany for him.

The first chapter of the Evangelist John’s Gospel is a long list of such epiphanies. After speaking of his own “aha”: *“the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth”* (John 1:14), the Evangelist continues with the Baptist’s “aha.”

It may seem surprising that John the Baptist had such a moment, since we know of John’s and Jesus’ relation. Nevertheless, John himself acknowledges it: *“I myself did not know him.”* It took an epiphany from the One *“who sent [John] to baptize with water”* for him to realize who Jesus truly is. The Lord had prepared him for it; He said to John, *“He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit”* (John 1:33). John saw it; “aha,” he realized; and he bore witness: *“this is the greater one”; “this is the one who will baptize by the Holy Spirit,” “this is the Son of God”* (John 1:34); He is *“the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world”* (John 1:29).

Moreover, by his testimony, John’s epiphany became an epiphany for all of Israel. John was sent for this very purpose — to be the messenger to prepare the way before the Lord (Mal. 3:1), to be the Elijah who by his preaching would *“turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers”* (Mal. 4:5-6), to be the “voice” in *“the wilderness”* preparing *“the way of the Lord”* (Isa. 40:3). It’s also why he came baptizing: *“that [this coming of the Lord] might be revealed to Israel”* (John 1:31), that Israel might have their own “aha!”

John proclaimed Jesus especially before his own disciples: *“Behold, the Lamb of God”* (John 1:36), and they had their “aha!” One of John’s disciples, Andrew, began to follow Jesus right then. It was an incredible testimony, and Andrew could have scoffed at it — *“Son of God? Right!”* But he didn’t.

We often act that way — we scoff at God’s word. When we hear it preached to us, especially today when it comes to the use of our sexual bodies, we scoff at it. We hear God’s word . . . we know it, but we let our baser passions overwhelm what we know is right. These passions can “dominate” us, and we use our bodies for sexual immorality, lust, pornography, joining in prostitution, engaging in adultery. And yes, it happens in the church — even among pastors, and not just in the Roman church. We have flesh, and our flesh leads us into sin; it *“is no help at all”* (John 6:63). Out of man’s heart come these things: *“evil thoughts, sexual immorality, . . . adultery”* (Mark 7:21). Repent; let us not scoff at God’s word, but let us listen to the Lord — *“Speak, [Lord,] for your servant hears”*; and let us *“glorify God in [our] body!”*

Andrew didn’t scoff at John’s proclamation. Rather, Andrew spent the whole day with Jesus — listening, and he came to realize: this Jesus is the Messiah! He is the Christ. Andrew told that to his brother Peter after he had sought him out. We don’t know that Peter’s “aha” came immediately, but it would come, and Peter, too, would follow after Jesus.

Next, the Evangelist tells us of Philip, a fellow resident of Bethsaida with Andrew and Peter. Philip, too, may have heard John’s proclamation of Jesus as the *“Lamb of God,”* and so it took only an invitation from Jesus — *“Follow me”* — for him to say, “aha,” “yes, Jesus is the Christ.”

He then went forth and found Nathanael and bore witness to him: *“We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote.”* This *“Jesus of Nazareth”* (not John) is *“the Prophet”* (John 1:21); He is the Messiah, *“the son of Joseph,”* the Son of David. We’re not going to worry that Philip called Jesus *“the son of Joseph”*; we’ve had an epiphany that Philip hadn’t yet received: we know that Jesus wasn’t Joseph’s natural son, but the Son of God who took on our flesh, being born of the Virgin Mary.

Now, Andrew and Philip heard and believed right away, but Nathanael was a bit of a tougher nut to crack. He was a skeptic here at the beginning — a scoffer, much like Thomas was at the end. Thomas refused to believe the testimony of his fellow disciples and insisted on seeing for himself; otherwise, *“I will never believe”* (John 20:25). Of course, Jesus provided Thomas’ “aha” when He showed him His hands and His side. And you know how Thomas responded to this epiphany: *“My Lord and my God”* (John 20:28). He believed.

Nathanael’s epiphany was not quite as dramatic, but his disbelief was as severe: *“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”* Nathanael’s skepticism is surely more understandable than Thomas’. Thomas had been told more than once that Jesus would *“be killed, and after three days rise again”* (Mark 8:31). Nathanael’s

skepticism, on the other hand, may have come from the fact that the Scripture doesn't talk about the Messiah coming from Nazareth. Regardless the reason, Nathanael rejected Philip's witness, and he, too, needed to see for himself to believe. Undeterred, Philip made the invitation, "*Come and see.*" And Nathanael did. He went to see Jesus; and Jesus provided his "aha."

Surely, this epiphany was much less impressive than a resurrection, but it was still an epiphany. Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward Him, and Jesus spoke of him: "*Behold, truly an Israelite, in whom there is no deceit!*"

"How might you know that?" Nathanael wondered. "Do you know me?" So, Jesus revealed a glimpse of his divine nature: "*Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.*" There it was! "Aha!" A figurative light appeared over Nathanael's head. He realized ... here is "*the Son of God*"; here is "*the King of Israel.*" And Nathanael believed.

But again, much like with Thomas, Jesus was not content to have the lesson stop there. Jesus would later say to Thomas: "*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*" (John 20:29). Here Jesus says to Nathanael: "*Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these.*"

Nathanael believed but had yet to witness that greater thing that Thomas saw — not all the miracles, but the heavens opened again. Nathanael missed the heavens opening as Jesus was baptized, but he would not miss it the second time, as we heard last Sunday. The next time would happen at the cross, when He who was filled with the Holy Spirit and who will baptize with the Holy Spirit would breathe out the Holy Spirit in death, and the curtain of the temple, covered with celestial objects, would tear open, and there would the Son of Man be ... there He is now, surrounded by angels, beckoning now all who look to Him and believe in Him to join Him in the heavenly places.

Dear saints of God, this is what awaits us ... us who have had our own "aha," not seeing as Thomas and Nathanael did, but hearing the word of Christ, listening to the testimony of the apostles and prophets, being washed in the baptism that Jesus instituted, partaking of the Supper Jesus gave us. In none of these things do we know by sight, but we know and believe because of the light of the Gospel of Christ, because "*the prophet of the Most High*" has also pointed us to the Lamb of God, because he has given us "*knowledge of salvation ... in the forgiveness of [our] sins*", because he has proclaimed that "*the sunrise ... from on high*" has visited us, to "*give light to [us] who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,*" and "*to guide our feet into the way of peace*" (Luke 1:76-79). And we have said, "aha!"

“Aha!” Our Epiphany: God Speaks; We Hear and Believe — John 1:43-51

Page 4

Second Sunday after the Epiphany Pastor Douglas Punke

This, dear saints, is our epiphany. The Lord speaks; we hear; and we believe. May we ever with Thomas and Nathanael cast off our disbelief and say: “Aha! We believe! We believe *‘that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.’* We believe that Jesus came for us and for our salvation. We believe that Jesus’ death is our life, that His blood is our forgiveness. And we trust *‘that by believing [we] have life in his name’*” (John 20:31). And may we who believe “lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity” (Small Catechism, Lord’s Prayer, Second Petition).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.