

**“GOD’S WATERMARK”**  
*Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12; Mark 1:9-11*  
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There is truth in the saying, “**Actions speak louder than words.**” It is one thing to memorize and recite the Apostles’ Creed. It is quite another thing to live by the tenets of the Christian faith. As one who preaches to a congregation and radio audience every week, I am haunted by the words, “What you do speaks so loudly I can hardly hear what you are saying.” More than one observer of the human condition has remarked that if we really want to know the values by which someone lives and the priorities that guide his or her life, we do not need to ask the person for a statement. Rather we should look at the person’s checkbook ledger, his credit card statement and her calendar or daily planner. **Actions speak louder than words**, you see.

Every now and then when I take my car to the shop the mechanic tells me my car needs an alignment. Now, of course, that costs money, and I’m never excited about having my car aligned, but the alternative is tires that wear unevenly and poorer gas mileage that my car should have. Every now and then our lives need their alignment checked as well. We need to make sure that what we say we believe is in line with our actions and our expenditures.

Today’s Gospel lessons are stories of people who were in alignment with what they said they believed and with their daily activities. The first is the familiar story of the wise men, those ancient forerunners of modern astronomers, those who study the stars and their formation. Tradition tells us that there were three of them, that they were royalty, and that they came from the East, from what is now the country of Iran. These astrologers studied the stars, the constellations and the movement in the heavens with an eye to what input the heavenly bodies might have for life on planet earth. They obviously had also studied history, for they knew when they saw a certain star that a king had been born, Israel’s Messiah, who would change the course of world history.

I want to say to us this morning that I believe that God makes God’s self known to us in ways that are objective and verifiable. The ability to see God’s hand at work in our lives is more than just the result of the power of suggestion. Yet at the same time, when we are open to the possibility of seeing God’s hand at work, we are much more likely to recognize the power of God and the works of God’s guiding hand. The wise men expected to see something. They recognized the star when they saw it, but they were looking for it at the time. They came to Jerusalem expecting to greet the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Although they were themselves royalty, they expected to see someone greater than themselves. The Bible tells us that when the star stopped, they were “*overwhelmed with joy.*” And when they saw the child

with Mary his mother, *“They knelt down and paid him homage.”* Actions **speak louder than words**. Not only were they searching. They were willing to travel a great distance and humble themselves when they found what they were looking for, or should I say, who they were looking for. In a haunting song by contemporary songwriters Richard Avery and Donald Marsh, ask, *“Will any three leaders of our time --- From here or from somewhere afar, Submit to the weather, Travel together, Search for the truth in the light of the Bethlehem star? Will any three leaders of our time --- Considering the power they bring, Defer to the baby, And even maybe Bow down together acknowledging him as their king? Will any three leaders of our time admit they should be reconciled, Abolish comparing, Recommend sharing, Turn into ploughshares their swords and their guns for this child?”* (1) What the world needs is not politicians who will say what people want to hear, but leaders who will guide by example, by the values of justice and fairness and integrity and compassion. **Actions speak louder than words.**

The wise men of old found what they were looking for. And the lesson for us today is that we, too, can find Jesus if we look for him. *“Arise, shine, for your light has come,”* writes the prophet Isaiah, *“And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.”* God has revealed God’s self to us in the presence of Jesus. The coming of Jesus means that God is with us. Do we recognize him? Are our eyes open to his presence among us? The lesson of the Gospel is that anyone can find him. The question is, are we willing to look for him, to make the journey, to kneel before him as those wise ones of old demonstrated by example? **Actions speak louder than words.**

Then, are we willing to pay him homage, not only with our lips, but with our lives? The wise men did not come to the manger empty handed. The gifts they brought were costly. I was in a store before Christmas and the clerk offered to wrap the gift I had just bought for my wife. I happily agreed. When she opened it on Christmas Day, and took it out of the box, to my great embarrassment, the price tag was still on the gift! While the store clerk had obviously made a mistake by not removing the price tag, the point is this: **every gift has a price**. The wise men knelt in homage to the One who was a greater king than they were. But they also put their money where their mouth was: they presented costly gifts. The Bible tells us that *“They opened their treasure chests, and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.”* The Bible does not record the words that they said. But it notes carefully their actions of worship and devotion. **Actions speak louder than words**, you see.

Because of the way the calendar falls this year, we celebrate the coming of the wise men and the Baptism of Jesus on the same Sunday. Actually, this is quite appropriate, for in both of these stories we are helped to see who Jesus is and what God is calling us to do. The first epiphany or revelation is that Jesus is a king, greater than any other earthly king. Jesus is a ruler whose sphere of influence is more vast and more powerful than any earthly ruler. The wise men of old understood that concept. Wise men and women today have that same epiphany.

The second epiphany occurs on the banks of a muddy stream in the Galilean countryside. Here we find John the Baptist preaching that God offers forgiveness to all people, and then baptizing anyone who was willing to go into the water. Lo and behold, here comes an adult Jesus to the water asking to be baptized by John!

Our first response may be, “He sure grew up fast!” And my response to that is, “Babies do!” I always counsel parents when they bring their children for baptism that they need to make good use of these formative years, for they go by in a hurry. Often a weary mother and a harried dad will look at me in disbelief. When the nights are long with colic, and the days drag on with feeding after feeding and endless diaper changes, it certainly doesn’t seem like time is going very

fast. Someone wiser than me commented, “The days are long, but the years are short.” All of a sudden, we are not holding babies anymore, but dealing with adults!

People ask, why Jesus was baptized, for baptism involves the washing away of sin and Jesus had no sin. I believe that Jesus was baptized as an example for what we should do, for **actions speak louder than words**. But Baptism involves more than the washing away of sin. It is God’s mark placed upon us at any age, acknowledging that we are more than just the product of our parents’ love; we are children of God, created in God’s image. If you hold a good piece of letterhead up to the light, you will see a watermark, an image that identifies the company which produced that piece of paper. The watermark is not easily visible, but if you look carefully, you will see it. In like manner, baptism is **God’s watermark**. A few seconds after our baptism, the water evaporates. But God’s mark of quality remains as a stamp upon us for the rest of our lives. When we realize that we are God’s children, made in God’s image, created for a purpose, it is an astounding epiphany. When we comprehend the meaning of this watermark, it affects everything we do, every action that we take, every word that we say.

Please note that whether we come to the baptismal font as a helpless infant with no say in the matter at all, or if we come as full grown adults after having contemplated the decision for days, months and even years, or anywhere in between, baptism is always God’s action, not ours. At any age, baptism is not something we do, but something that is done to us and for us. We do not come to God, you see; God comes to us. God is the initiator. God places God’s mark upon us. God gives us our identity. It is not something we choose.

What we choose is whether or not we will follow the course that God sets for us as baptized persons, as people of faith. Will we follow where God leads? The astounding epiphany for those ancient astrologers in the Near East and for the folks at the Jordan River was the revelation that God was no longer hidden in the heavens but had become incarnate in the person of Jesus. All we need to know about God is now knowable in the character, purpose and grace of Jesus. What an epiphany!

Jesus emerged from the water with a vision of who he was and what his mission would be. Jesus’ baptism established his identity as the Son of God. In like manner, our baptism establishes our identity as sons and daughters of God. Just as God had a purpose for Jesus’ life, so God has a purpose for your life and mine. Is that purpose clear in your mind? Are you following the path that God intends for your life?

I read an observation recently by Sister Joan Chittister, a Benedictine author who writes, *“One of the most interesting things about modern life is that almost nobody you talk to is where they started out thinking they would be at this point in their lives.”* Is that true for you? In many ways, it’s true for me. But hasn’t that always been true, especially for people of faith? Did those wise men of old think that they would be traveling to Jerusalem to see a baby? Did any of the disciples start out thinking they would change careers, change their values system and follow this Galilean teacher for the rest of their lives?

But they did! And I remind you, **actions speak louder than words**. Do you need an alignment this morning? Do you need to re-commit your life to the One who put his mark upon your life at your baptism and claimed you for his very own?

It is customary in the United Methodist Church to use only a few drops of water for Baptism, and to renew our baptismal vows with a single cross of water on our foreheads. But this morning I hope you will allow yourself to be completely immersed in the presence and power of God. I hope you will envision a river where the water is deep enough to get your whole body wet. I hope you will allow yourself to be drenched in God’s love and God’s power.

Give God control of your life! Live up to the high quality of the watermark that God has placed upon you. **Give God a chance** to do greater things in your life this year. Will you follow Jesus? What will your answer be? Remember, **actions speak louder than words!**

*Prayer:* Dear God, as the wise men of old brought their gifts, so we bring our lives to you. As Jesus emerged from the water of his baptism with a clear sense of his purpose and direction, help us to sense our purpose and your will for our lives as we renew our baptismal vows. Help us to follow where you lead this day and every day of our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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