



- Jan 7 Epiphany Celebration  
Jan 14 Epiphany 2 Worship Team Meeting following the service at Pioneer  
Jan 17 Coffee and Conversation ZOOM at 10:00 a.m.  
Jan 18 Community Prayer Ministry 6:30 to 8 p.m. See Flyer  
Pre-registration [cathyferrenrhn@gmail.com](mailto:cathyferrenrhn@gmail.com).  
Jan 21 Epiphany 3 Worship Leadership Team Meeting following the service  
Jan 25 Monthly Circle Dance 6:30 - 8 p.m.  
Jan 28 Epiphany 4 Worship  
Feb 1 7 p.m. Theatrical event "Shirley Valentine"  
Feb 2 7 p.m. Theatrical event "Shirley Valentine"  
Feb 3 2 p.m. Matinée for "Shirley Valentine"  
Feb 4 Epiphany 5 Worship service 10:30 a.m.  
Feb 4 2 p.m. Matinée for "Shirley Valentine"  
Feb 11 Transfiguration Sunday-Communion  
Feb 13 Shrove Tuesday Pancake Luncheon 11:30 am -1:30 p.m.  
Feb 14 ASH WEDNESDAY beginning of Lent  
Feb 25 Lent 1

**First Sunday after Epiphany,  
January 7, 2024**

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04/05/2024

**WE GATHER**

**Welcome**

**Family Life and Work**

**Acknowledgement of the Land**

As we begin our worship here in Lake Bays Township we acknowledge the ancient indigenous history and heritage of the land upon which we live and work. We acknowledge the many original people of this land with all their different languages and cultures, we acknowledge the First Nations, the Metis people and the Inuit people. We give thanks for their care for the land and the waters. We are grateful for their teachings which are much needed in our times, about how to honour our spiritual connections with the earth by living with respect in creation.

## **Lighting of the Christ Candle**

### **Call to Worship: (responsive)**

Beloved, let us love one another,  
**because love is from God.**

God's love was revealed in a new way when Jesus was born.

**Since God loved us so much,  
we are called to love one another.**

Come, let us worship our God.

### **Opening Hymn: Before the marvel of this night VU# 40**

Before the marvel of this night,  
adoring, fold your wings and bow,  
Then tear the sky apart with light,  
and with your news the world endow.  
Proclaim the birth of Christ and peace,  
that fear and death and sorrow cease:  
Sing peace, sing peace, sing gift of peace,  
sing peace, sing gift of peace!

Awake the sleeping world with song,  
this is the day the Lord has made.  
Assemble here, celestial throng,  
in royal splendor come arrayed.  
Give earth a glimpse of heav'nly bliss,

a teasing taste of what they miss:  
Sing bliss, sing bliss, sing endless bliss,  
sing bliss, sing endless bliss!

The love that we have always known,  
our constant joy and endless light,  
Now to the loveless world be shown,  
now break upon its deathly night.  
Into one song compress the love  
that rules our universe above:  
Sing love, sing love, sing God is love,  
sing love, sing God is love!

### **Prayer of Approach (unison)**

Let me be like a star for you O God.  
May I burn brightly  
with your love.  
Explode in me,  
that I might burst  
with the possibility of your grace.  
Shine so brightly, in my words,  
and in my actions,  
that the world might see only you.  
Make me an Epiphany of your love O God.  
Amen

### **WE LISTEN**

**Readings:** Matthew 2: 1-12, Mark 1: 4-11

Video Reflection: Neil deGrasse. The Most Astounding Fact

**Sermon/reflection:** Cosmic Considerations

This Sunday I am combining readings from both January 6th (the day of Epiphany and the story of the Magi following the Star) and the readings for this first Sunday of Epiphany from the gospel of Mark. Both invite us to cosmic considerations and I will be using some of the insights from the following sermon by a wonderful writer named Debie Thomas which she calls “Wild Water.”

If I asked you to describe the sacrament of baptism, what adjectives would you choose? Beautiful? Solemn? Ancient? Holy? Maybe you’d describe sculpted marble fonts, lacy christening gowns, wiggly babies, and delighted godparents. But would my question prompt you to use the word “wild?” As in: baptism is one of the wildest things Christians do? Has it ever occurred to you that this watery, two-thousand-year-old ritual of the Church is *wild*? The language the Scriptures give us is not the language of churchy decorum. It is feral language. The language of the untamed and the unpredictable.

Our reading from Genesis describes a formless void and a deep, impenetrable darkness. It is not a polished basin of warm water the Spirit hovers over; it is an elemental, undifferentiated “face,” brimming with promise and risk. Our Psalm, meanwhile, conjures a God of storms, flames, and “mighty waters.” This God “thunders,” “causes the oaks to whirl,” and “shakes the wilderness.” In our reading from the New Testament, St. Paul baptizes a group of Ephesian disciples, causing their tongues to break loose into languages of prophecy they never knew they could speak. And in our Gospel from St. Mark, we read that when John baptized Jesus, the heavens were visibly “torn apart,” the Spirit dove-bombed out of the skies, and the very voice of God filled the desert air.

What does this mean? Why frame Jesus’s baptism — and, by extension, our own — in the language of wildness? Here are a few reasons:

**There is wildness at the margins.** Mark’s Gospel makes a point of telling us that John the Baptizer appeared “in the wilderness.” That is to say, he did *not* conduct his ministry in Jerusalem, at the temple, in the center of his people’s religious life. Instead, he drew the crowds away from the center, asking them to repent and receive baptism in the wilderness.

Astonishingly, the crowds responded to his irreverent invitation: “People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem” went out to meet John at the Jordan River. Think about this for a moment. John the camel-wearing, locust-eating prophet *emptied the city*.

Removed as we are from the cultural context of first century Palestine, it is easy for us to miss the significance of the mass exodus St. Mark describes.

Jerusalem was the beating heart of Israel's spiritual life. The temple was *the* place to go to meet God, and rituals of purification by water were already a feature of Jewish devotional life. But something in John's message compelled a whole population to leave their religious epicenter for spiritual nourishment and rebirth. Something authentic and fresh resonated for them in the movement away from the center of institutionalized dogma and authority. Whatever God was about to do necessitated a decentering. A disruption. A shift away from business as usual.

Does that "something" resonate for us as well? I am not suggesting that genuine faith always necessitates a movement away from the institutions we cherish. But isn't it often the case that the most compelling and daring calls for justice, truth-telling, peacemaking, and healing come to us, not from the institutionalized "inside," but from the outside? Not from the official places, but from the marginal ones? Haven't we seen countless "centers" in our cultural, political, and religious lives lose their prophetic edges to complacency, corruption, stodginess, or fear? Haven't we heard new voices speaking to us from wild and unexpected places, calling us to repentance and renewal?

Jesus was baptized in a wild place. Far away from the safe, the routine, and the familiar. If we want to follow him in our own baptisms, we, too, need to listen to voices crying out in the desert. We, too, need to leave the "cities" that make up our comfort zones. We, too, need to allow a good but wild God to disrupt us.

**There is wildness in solidarity:** According to Christian historian John Dominic Crossan, Jesus's baptism was an "acute embarrassment" for the early Church. This is evident in the unease we detect in all four Gospel accounts. Mark keeps his version of the story as spare as possible. Matthew insists that John tried hard to dissuade Jesus from receiving the rite he offered the crowds. Luke skips the identity of the Baptizer altogether. And the fourth Gospel doesn't even mention Jesus's baptism.

Apparently, what scandalized the Gospel writers was Jesus's decision to receive a baptism of *repentance*. Repentance for what? Wasn't the Son of God perfect? Sinless? Holy? What was the Messiah doing in the murky water of the Jordan River, aligning himself with the great unwashed? And why did God choose *that* sordid moment to tear the cosmos apart and call Jesus "beloved?"

Why, indeed? Why *did* the Son of the Most High get in line for baptism behind the tax collectors and sinners — the very folks who could sully his reputation?

Why didn't he care about appearances? About disgrace? About guilt by association? Aren't God's children supposed to care about such things?

Apparently not, because Jesus's first public act was an act of radical solidarity. An act of stepping into intimate, inextricable, "shameful" relationship with sinful humanity. Instead of holding himself apart, instead of protecting his own purity, Jesus stepped into the same water we stand in, and wedded his reputation and his destiny to ours.

In his baptism, Jesus entered into the full, unwieldy messiness of the human family. In one watery act, he stepped into the whole Story of God's work on earth, and allowed that story to resonate, deepen, and find completion. In our baptisms, we vow to do the same. In the wild waters of our immersion, we join our beings to *all* beings, and throw our lot in with theirs. If this doesn't startle you, you need to pay closer attention.

To embrace Christ's baptism story is to embrace the wild truth that we are united, interdependent, connected, *one*. Whether we like it or not, the bond God seals by water and by the Spirit is truer and deeper than all others. It makes a stronger claim on our lives and loyalties than all prior claims of race, gender, tribe, nationality, politics, preference, or affinity. It asks that we bear all the risks of belonging. The risk that others might hurt us. The risk that others will change. The risk that they will change *us*.

Is it easy to honor such a staggering claim? No. Do we have a choice? No. Are we (the Church) known for doing this well? No. But that is not because God's claim is optional; it is because we have tamed baptism, turning it into something merely ritualistic and decorative. But the truth is, we *can't* have the water without the kinship. We can't receive the sacrament without surrendering our separateness. It doesn't matter one bit if we're "non-joiners" by temperament. Our baptism is our belonging.

**There is wildness in God's geography:** In a beautiful essay entitled, "Holy Water Everywhere," *Christian Century* editor, Steve Thorngate, describes baptism as a sacrament that straddles the "locative" and the "liberative." We are baptized *locally*, in a specific time and place, into the spiritual life of a particular parish or faith community. This aspect of baptism pushes against all attempts to treat Christianity as a cerebral, otherworldly abstraction. Baptism insists that "this place, here — this ground, this water — is holy."

At the same time, baptism *liberates* us into the global, the universal, and the timeless. The water we step into at baptism is connected to all bodies of water, everywhere, which means we cannot contain or constrict the sacred within any walls of denomination, dogma, liturgy, or practice.

Baptism, Thorngate writes, creates its own map: “It is not a local map that stresses boundaries and the dangerous unknown that lies beyond them; nor is it a globe that erases everything particular, small, and nearby.”

This is why our lectionary this week juxtaposes the Creation story, a Psalm of God’s overwhelming power over nature, and a story of the early church, with Jesus’s baptism. When Jesus consents to the waters of the Jordan River, he consents to both the locative and the liberative, to both the particular and the universal. He enters into a holy geography that includes the unformed waters of Creation; the storied landscapes of his poet-ancestor, David; and every font, pool, lake, river, and ocean his followers — from St. Paul onwards — immerse themselves in after Jesus’s time on earth is over. The Spirit who hovered over the unformed earth at the dawn of Creation is the same Spirit who hovers over us today. The Lord who thundered over the mighty waters during King David’s reign is the same God who “sits enthroned” now. The God who loosened the tongues of first-century believers to speak truth to power is the same God who raises up prophets today. In other words, the geography of baptism is vast. It spans all times and all worlds. It is far too large and wild a thing for us to tame or control.

During this brief liturgical season between Christmas and Lent, we are invited to leave miraculous births and angel choirs behind, and seek the love, majesty, and power of God in seemingly mundane things. Rivers. Voices. Doves. Clouds. Holy hands covering ours, lowering us into the water of repentance and new life. In the Gospel stories we will read during this season, God will part the curtain for brief, shimmering moments, allowing us to look beneath and beyond the ordinary surfaces of our lives, and catch glimpses of the wild and the extraordinary. This, of course, is another way of describing the sacrament of baptism itself: it is a place and a moment where the “extraordinary” of God’s grace blesses the ordinary water we stand in.

May we, during this season and always, join Jesus as he stands in line at the water’s edge, willing to immerse himself in shame and scandal so that all the wild wonder of God might be ours to cherish. May we, too, hear the delighted Voice that tells us who we are and whose we are in the sacrament of baptism. Even in the wild, untameable water we stand in, may we know ourselves as God’s Beloved.

## WE RESPOND

Offertory Hymn "Grant Us, God, the Grace of Giving" VU#540

Offertory/Prayer of Dedication

Prayers of the People

**Leader:** Lord hear our prayer

**Response:** And let our cry come unto you.

Closing Hymn: Let There be Light VU#679

1 Let there be light,  
let there be understanding,  
let all the nations gather,  
let them be face to face;

2 open our lips,  
open our minds to ponder,  
open the door of concord  
opening into grace;

3 perish the sword,  
perish the angry judgement,  
perish the bombs and hunger,  
perish the fight for gain;

4 hallow our love,  
hallow the deaths of martyrs,  
hallow their holy freedom,  
hallowed be your name;

5 your kingdom come,  
your spirit turn to language,  
your people speak together,  
your spirit never fade;

6 let there be light;



open our hearts to wonder,  
perish the way of terror,  
hallow the world God made.

### **Commissioning and Benediction**

May the blessing of the Star-Maker  
Who enfolded stardust into every element of life  
Be with us.

May the blessing of Jesus, the Christ  
Who shows every heart the way home  
Be with us.

May the blessing of the Holy Spirit  
Who inspires us and leads us and upholds us—  
bringing every goodness to our world—  
Be with us.  
Amen.

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#### Ongoing Stewardship:

There are several different options for you to gift your offering to Lake of Bays Pastoral Charge.

1. In person and on the plate. (Each congregation has a different practice around this but you can't miss it!)
2. Via PAR (preauthorized remittance). Then you don't have to think about it again. Money is withdrawn monthly
3. By e-transfer. The email address for donations via e-transfer is [lobunited-churches@gmail.com](mailto:lobunited-churches@gmail.com) In the subject line/comment please identify to which of the Churches you wish to donate, Pioneer in Hillside, Stewart in Dwight or Knox in Dorset.
4. By cheque: If you send a cheque, please make it out to Lake of Bays Pastoral Charge and mail it to: LOB United Churches, P.O. Box 196, Dwight, ON P0A 1H0