

The first Sunday after Epiphany

“The light is the life” (John 1:4)

Have you ever been to a naturalization ceremony for new citizens? Or seen one on TV?

In Canada citizenship ceremonies happen at NHL games. A red carpet is laid out on the ice. The new immigrants walk out to the middle of the arena. The official reads some words and pronounces the new immigrants to be Canadian citizens. The crowd stands, cheers, and hollers: “Welcome to Canada!” One immigrant said the relief, joy, and sense of belonging she felt that day are unforgettable.

In our country citizenship ceremonies are held usually in court houses and schools, less dramatic than center ice at an NHL game, but no less moving. When the official announcement is made, **it is done**. Citizenship has been conferred.

The same is true for the courtroom ceremony finalizing an adoption. When the court issues the decree of **adoption**, the relationship of the parents with their child has been permanently and legally established. **It is done**.

Or imagine yourself in a criminal courtroom, guilty of a crime, but instead of sentencing you to prison, the judge declares you not guilty. You are free to go. **It is done**.

Citizenship ceremonies, adoption ceremonies, and criminal trials – are all events in which the proclaimed word decisively changes life: You are now citizens! Your child is now fully yours! You are free to go! These events are useful analogies (not perfect) for preaching, our focus today.

In this season of Epiphany we celebrate the coming of the light. John 1:4: “In him was life and the life was the light of men.” The **life** was the **light**. The light comes. John 1:14: “The **Word** became **flesh** and dwelt among us.” The **light** is the **life**. The light explodes the darkness; it comes to save us.

But how are people to believe in him of whom they have never heard? Quoting Isa 53:1, Paul asks: “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” And Paul answers: in Romans 10:17: “So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes **by the preaching of Christ**.”

Christ himself comes **by the preaching** of him. The preaching itself is **the means** of his coming. Like baptism and the Lord’s Supper, preaching is **the means** by which he comes to save.

(Beware the bias in translations here. The ESV tips the text to evangelical decision theology. Rom 10:17: “...hearing comes through the word of Christ.” The translation, “the word of Christ,” helps those who want to imply that faith here is a matter of believing things in a book, an objectified deposit of faith, whereas the “preaching of Christ” rightly lifts up the preaching as a **sacramental means** of salvation. The usual meaning of the Greek word involved is “speaking.”)

Christ is not absent; he is here, living, and active in his Word to convict of sin and convince of grace. He is here **by means** of his Word, as many texts say:

1 Thessalonians 2:9: “For you remember our labor and toil, brethren; we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you, while **we preached to you** the gospel of God.” And 2:13: “And we

also thank God constantly for this, that when you received **the word of God** which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, **the word of God, which is at work in you believers.**"

1 Peter 1:23-25: "You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through **the living and abiding word of God**; for 'All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord abides forever.' That word is **the good news which was preached to you.**"

Preaching is the means by which the Lord breaks through time and space to be here. By the preaching of Christ, he himself is here, really here, convicting of sin and convincing of grace.

The pastor is like the one who delivers the mail. The longtime motto of the Postal Service applies to pastors, too: "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night **stays these couriers** from the swift completion of their appointed rounds."

Like the mail carrier, the pastor has a singular focus.

The pastor's job is not to be an entertainer, a razzle-dazzle performer, or ringmaster. The pastor's job is not to be a salesman, pitching folks to make a decision. The preacher is also not a taskmaster, giving believers their weekly spiritual to-do list.

A sermon is not a motivational speech, nor a virtue-signaling talk about abstractions like love and grace, which can be anywhere and mean most anything. Nor is a sermon about doctrines and dogmas.

Paul writes: "...it pleased God through **the folly of what we preach** to save those who believe (1 Cor 1:21). The **folly** of what we preach? What **folly** is this?

In *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice says to the Red Queen: "One can't believe **impossible things**." "I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as **six impossible things before breakfast**."

But this is not the folly of faith, believing six impossible things before breakfast! The folly we preach is not about magical or mysterious things.

Rather, **the folly is the cross and resurrection.**

Back in 1515 Matthias Grünewald painted the crucifixion, and he put John the Baptist in the scene, standing off to one side of the cross with his arm raised, and index finger pointing to the crucified Jesus. As John 1:6 reads: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light." John the Baptist is there in Grünewald's famous painting, pointing to the cross, as if to say in the words of John 1:29: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

What John the Baptist did, we do. We point: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

The crucified one was raised up; he is the living Lord of all creation, who like light exploding in the darkness, breaks through space and time to reach us in our darkness, to give us light now and for eternity.

He comes **by the means** of the folly of what we preach. In the folly of what we preach, he is really present here today. It is done. It is finished. He renders judgment. He gives faith. As Luther writes in his Small Catechism:

I believe that by my own understanding or strength
I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him,
but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel,
enlightened me with his gifts, and made me holy
and kept me in the true faith.”

Preaching is in a way like a citizenship ceremony, an adoption ceremony, or the verdict rendered in a criminal courtroom. A judgment is announced; life is changed.

Christ is living and here with us, **by means** of his Word to convict of sin and convince of grace. We are guilty but made free.

Because he did it by himself, without our help, **it is done.**
Our salvation is certain. We are free.
Free in this world to live as forgiven sinners.
Free to use our heads in the battles of life.
Free to proclaim his Lordship and kingdom to come.
He has taken care of “forever” for us. **It is done.**