

January 11, 2026
First Sunday after the Epiphany
The Baptism of our Lord

You Already Belong

This morning, about twenty-six adults and youth will begin preparing to be received or confirmed in the Episcopal Church when the bishop visits on March 1st. Over the next few months, they'll be learning more about how we Episcopalians follow Jesus - what we believe, how we pray, how we worship, how we govern, and how all that informs the way we live.

They'll also learn that preachers don't just pick scripture that sounds good to us. Each week's readings follow a rhythm far bigger than any one of us - a rhythm of prayer, scripture, and worship that shapes and carries the Church throughout the year. That rhythm is called the lectionary.

The lectionary is simply a schedule of readings that walks the Church, week by week, through the life of Jesus. We Episcopalians join Christians across the country and across the world - hearing the same scriptures, engaging the same stories, and being shaped by God's grace together.

This year, during Lectionary Year A of a three-year cycle, we follow primarily the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew begins in a way many of us are tempted to skip over: with a genealogy - a long list of names, generation after generation, yada, yada, yada.

But then again, we Southerners shouldn't be too bored by it; we, too, love to play the name game. After all, the people we come from help the story of how we got here today. So, behind all those names, Matthew is also trying to help tell the story of how Jesus got here today.

That genealogy is filled with people who are complicated yet courageous, broken yet faithful, sinners yet saints. The genealogy reminds us that Jesus' family is just as - perhaps even more—dysfunctional than our own. And still, God works through them - every one of them—to bring Jesus to this moment on the banks of the River Jordan.

God used imperfect people to carry Jesus to the water's edge. And that is not just Jesus' story. It is the story of the Bible. It is the story of us.

It's one of the reasons I'm beginning a new Bible study called *A Who's Who of the Bible*. We meet Tuesdays at 8:30 a.m. All are welcome. When we slow down and really meet the people of the Bible, we discover that God uses all kinds of people to accomplish the work of salvation.

God even works through imperfect people to reveal his Word to the world. Why? Because imperfect people are all we have. Those are the people who get Jesus to the River Jordan. And those are the kinds of people, for better and for worse, who got us there too.

When Jesus is baptized, the heavens open, the Spirit descends, and a voice from heaven says, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Notice when this happens: not after his first sermon, not after his first healing, not after his first miracle, but before all of that. Before he does anything, he is given the name we all long to hear - Beloved child of God.

This is where baptism runs directly against how most of us learn to live in the world. Because most of the ways we are initiated into things in life require proving. You take the test before you pass the class. You try out before you make the team. You audition before you get the part. You prove your worth before you’re trusted at work.

You present a particular version of yourself online and in person, hoping you’ll be accepted once you’ve shown the right version of yourself. From an early age, we learn that belonging usually comes after achievement.

And for many people, church has felt like yet another place where that same logic applies. Spoken or unspoken, the church sometimes seems to say, first, believe the right things; then, behave the right way; and finally you belong just as long as you believe and behave the right way.

Believe. Behave. Belong. is the paradigm most of us are familiar with. But baptism tells a different story. In baptism, belonging comes first. “You are my beloved” is the starting point for his ministry.

Yes, we are not passive in the life of faith. Living into our baptismal vows is a real choice. But baptism itself is not the story of our decision. It is the story of God’s decision to stay faithful, even when we fail to. We love because God first loved us.

An infant simply belongs. None of us baptizes ourselves. We are brought here. We are carried here, both literally and figuratively, by parents, by godparents, by sponsors, by friends, by sinners and saints we may never even know. Just as Jesus was carried to the Jordan by generations before him, so we are carried to the font. And that also matters for how we understand confirmation. Confirmation isn’t about earning anything new; it’s about owning, maybe for the first time, what has been true all along.

At baptism, promises are made on our behalf. In confirmation, we claim those promises for ourselves. Not because baptism was incomplete, but because faith grows and deepens over time. Baptism doesn’t end with being named beloved, that is where it begins.

Through the words of the Baptismal Covenant, a covenant we will reaffirm in a few minutes, we are given a way to live: to pray, to gather in fellowship, to resist evil, to repent and return to God, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to strive for justice and peace - and to honor the dignity of every human being. And as you make these promises, I hope you will do so with the world within you and the world around you in your mind and on your heart.

We make these promises not in a vacuum, but in the reality of our own time, just as Jesus entered the world in a particular moment in history. We make them in a world that is often unfair, cruel, and frightening, but even here, even now, baptism reminds us that we are still called to be givers of God's love and grace that we receive here each and every week.

In the baptismal prayer over the water, there is a phrase that has always grabbed my attention: we promise to follow Christ in joyful obedience. Not fearful obedience. Not scared right obedience. Not obedience rooted because I said so. Joyful obedience. Obedience that flows from grace and love.

When we know we are beloved, obedience stops being about proving ourselves and starts being about trusting that God has already done that in Christ. We don't live the baptismal vows so that God will love us. We live them because God already does. The world says, "Behave so you'll belong."

Baptism says something else: you belong, now live into who you already are. This is what our confirmands are preparing for. Not a test to pass, but a life to grow into. A chance to say yes—to live more fully into promises that began at the font. And none of us lives those promises perfectly.

But we return to them again and again, not because we've failed, but because we belong. At baptism, we are marked as Christ's own forever. Nothing can take that away from us - nothing at all. That's why we gather every Sunday. That's why we pray daily. That's why we return again and again to the font, to God's Word, to the Eucharistic Table. Not to convince God to love us. But to remember God's claim on us in baptism. Worship is not how we climb our way to God. Worship reminds us that God has already made a way to us, a way we glimpse most clearly in the waters of baptism.

You might even say that baptism creates a kind of portal, where heaven and earth meet in Christ. So this morning, as we hear the story of Jesus' baptism, I invite you to think about who carried you here. Who carried you to the font? Who carried you to faith? Who carried you through doubt, through loss, through change?

Who made space for you to belong before you had it all figured out? Who reminded you of your belovedness, especially when the world tried to convince you otherwise? God used imperfect people to bring Jesus to baptism. God used imperfect people to bring you to baptism.

And God is still using imperfect people, people like those in Matthew's genealogy, people who brought Jesus into the world, and we are part of that story too. We join that same lineage, called to carry the promise of God into the world today and for generations to come. In a world that says, "Prove yourself," baptism says, "You belong." Beloved in Christ, you belong. You are beloved, and nothing, and I mean nothing, will change that. Amen.