

**The Baptism of the Lord**  
 Acton Congregational Church (UCC)  
 08 January 2022  
 Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Acts 10:34-43  
 Matthew 3:13-17

*“He is Lord of all.”*  
 ~ Acts 10:36c

**Prayer**  
**Living God,**  
**Let your Spirit descend upon us**  
**That we may hear the Word proclaimed**  
**And remember why we listen to, obey and follow the baptized Lord. Amen.**

During the two and a half years that I served as a pastoral resident at the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, I was never fully prepared for the coffee hour after each of the three Sunday morning services. A large city church located on Chicago’s Magnificent Mile, across from the iconic John Hancock building, and only a mile east from the public housing project that used to be known as Cabrini Green always had in its social hall a tiny fraction of the colorful, beautiful, unique and diverse humanity that surrounded it and that’s what made the fellowship hour so fascinating and somewhat intimidating for the pastoral staff. Coffee hour at Fourth Church was always enveloped in a great cloud of unknowing. There was no telling what kind of encounter we might have once we walked into the fellowship hall. I still remember the young man who spent at least 15 minutes talking to me about the spirituality of Cannabis use. Before I could finally walk away, he suggested that Fourth Presbyterian ministers would deliver sermons far more spiritually inspiring and relevant if we “took a hit of the weed” before sitting down to write and standing up to preach. Another time an older woman asked for my pastoral advice on how to broach the sensitive topic of the workout clothing the only male in her wellness group at the church wore at the exercise classes. She wanted to tell him that his workout tights were too distracting. [I bet you thought pastors have it easy, didn’t you!...] And then there were those unexpected conversations that surprised me for their theological depth.

I still remember the three very young Japanese tourists who approached me during coffee hour with a question about the Sacrament of Baptism. As we did this morning, two babies were baptized on that second Sunday in January, which our tradition observes as the Sunday of the Baptism of the Lord or, in its more inclusive language, the Baptism of Christ. Before sprinkling the baptismal water on the head of each child, the Senior Minister asked their parents the same question he had asked at countless other baptisms: “***What is the Christian name of this child?***” But what was a mere liturgical question repeated at every baptism for most of the people in the pews sounded harrowingly odd to the

Japanese visitors. The three friends were new to the Christian faith and having just been baptized at their small church in Tokyo, they were unsettled by the idea that they were not given “*Christian*” names. They wanted to know and not just out of cultural curiosity but out of a deep desire to live a genuine Christian life whether their Japanese given names might somehow make their baptism less sacred, less biblical, less valid and less Christian. I assured the young women that there is no such thing as a “*Christian name*” and pointed out that Jesus and all of his first disciples had been given Jewish names. I even waxed a bit poetic and quoted Shakespeare to make my point that while our names are important and being named and claimed by a family of faith is a beautiful part of the ritual of baptism there is something much bigger and deeper in the Sacrament of Baptism than saying out loud the name of a child. For as Juliet says so rightly, “***What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.***”<sup>1</sup>

Our given names, even those we do not like very much or would rather not have, matter. Naming a child is an act of profound love. Knowing another person by their name is an affirmation of our deep and sincere desire to be part of their one-of-a-kind-not-to-be-repeated-ever story, journey, heritage, dreams, struggles, successes and life. In the Jewish Scriptures, God expresses God’s unreserved, unrestricted and unequivocal love for God’s people by saying only these simple words, “***I have called you by name, you are mine.***”<sup>2</sup> When you love another person, you remember their name. You learn to spell, write and pronounce their name. Sometimes, you even shorten their names or give them sweet nicknames. In my extended family, no one calls me Paulo. For them, I will always be “*Gu*,” which is the hypocorism for my middle name “*Gustavo*.” The theme song for the TV show “*Cheers*” has it right, people wanna go and be where everybody knows their name<sup>3</sup> and that’s why I very intentionally repeated Marissa Rose’s name so many times during the liturgy of baptism this morning. I hope and pray that this congregation will be the place where she will want to come back to because, here, she will always be known by her name. But, back at the coffee hour in Chicago in 2001, I also told the young Japanese women who clearly took their baptism very seriously that regardless of our given names, baptism sets us apart as people who are willing to open our hearts to God’s Spirit. At baptism, we are marked as Christ’s own, and we accept God’s invitation to live in this world as baptized Christians, that is, as human beings who are living no longer for ourselves alone, but in obedience to the love of God revealed, enfleshed, and acted out in the teachings and life of Jesus Christ.

After almost two thousand years of tradition, liturgies and rituals, the Church of the twenty-first century sometimes gets a bit confused about what baptism means and why it is so central to the Christian faith. And who can blame us for not having a firm grasp on the theology of baptism? The Bible does not give one clear and consistent description of the meaning and purpose of baptism. There is nary a mention of baptism in the First Testament. We know that observant Jews in the first century practiced regular purification rituals throughout their lifetime that required full immersion in water from a natural source. To go into the Temple to pray or to attend the major feasts like the Passover, all Jews had to wash in a mikveh, which is a pool with enough fresh and clean water to cover the entire

body of an average-sized person, to be considered ritually clean to stand in God's Presence. Adult converts to Second-Temple Judaism, both men and women, went through a full-body bath after a time of intentional study of the Torah and the Prophets and the proper way to keep the traditions of the Jewish faith. Only then they were welcomed into the Covenant as newborn children with the past behind them and the future as faithful Jews ahead of them. The Essenes, a Jewish sect that saw themselves as the faithful remnant of Israel, gathered as a community of faith to witness the full immersion and the emersion of their new members. But none of these immersion-in-water and purification rites were once-and-forever like the baptism in the Christian tradition. To remain a faithful member of the Jewish faith, observant Jews would go through many immersions during their lives. Our practice of baptism is not clearly rooted in the First Testament and when we get to the Gospels, Mark, Matthew and Luke give an account of Jesus' baptism, but the evangelists offer no satisfactory explanation as to why so many people were queueing up to receive John's baptism of forgiveness by way of repentance or why Jesus, God's sinless Son, also went to the river Jordan to be baptized by his cousin.

We know that after his resurrection and before his ascension, Jesus made it clear that baptism is an important practice for his Church. The Risen Christ instructed his eleven followers "[to go]... **and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching [people] to observe all that [he had] commanded [them],**"<sup>4</sup> but nowhere in the Gospels we find a single story about the baptism of those first disciples. The Gospel of John claims in the third chapter that Jesus and his followers spent some time in Judea baptizing<sup>5</sup> only to reverse course at the beginning of the following chapter and say that it was the disciples and not Jesus who were performing the baptisms.<sup>6</sup> It is very possible that Jesus baptized the Twelve, but we will never know if he did it. The New Testament only confirms that the apostles carried out Jesus' commandment to make new disciples and baptize. The passage Heather Makris read today shows that Peter along with the other founders of the early Jesus Movement focused on adult baptism or on what some Christian traditions today call "believer's baptism," which follows the pattern of a public confession of faith followed by the symbolic washing of one's sins in the baptismal water and the gift of new life of faith. On the other hand, there is no irrefutable Scriptural evidence for infant baptism in the New Testament unless we infer from a few passages in the Book of Acts and 1 Corinthians,<sup>7</sup> where entire households are said to have received the Sacrament of Baptism, that children and babies were likely to have been baptized along with their parents. And to complicate our understanding of the theology of baptism even more, the apostle Paul, whose letters were written much earlier than the four Gospels, used the language of dying and rising with Christ to describe the fresh start that baptism represents. Paul connected baptism to a spiritual resurrection or a life-transforming experience of dying to an old self and rising to a whole new being filled and empowered by the Living Spirit of God.

It is not hard to see why different Christian traditions emphasize one or the other aspect of baptism. This morning some churches will celebrate baptism as an immersion-in-water ritual. Others, like our church, will sprinkle water on a child's head and will declare

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Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

that at baptism we hear once again the voice of God re-affirming God's unconditional love for us even before we are old enough to begin to make sense of the depth and width of God's love. There are churches today that will think of baptism as a well-established Christian practice of naming and claiming babies as part of the Church Universal and there will be a few others where new members will be invited to make a public confession of faith and receive in Christ's name the baptism of repentance and forgiveness. I hope that no matter what your personal theology, interpretation, or understanding of baptism may be that you will consider prayerfully and seriously what I said to the three Japanese women 22 years ago, that there is something deeper and bigger that happens at our baptism. Something more robust and meaningful than tradition or ritual. Something that empowers us to open our whole selves to the guidance of God's Holy Spirit.

That is my favorite part of the story of Jesus' baptism, that is, when Matthew describes the moment when the heavens open and Jesus sees God's Spirit floating down toward him peacefully, gracefully, quietly and gently. The evangelist cannot find the right words to explain this descending of God's Spirit, so the Gospel writer talks about something "**like a dove**" that comes and rests on Jesus. It is amazing to imagine that the Holy Spirit, the very essence of God, could look even remotely like something so simple, small, and fragile as a dove, but it is even more awe-inspiring to think of how the Spirit that was present at the baptism of Jesus of Nazareth gave Jesus the strength, the faith, the energy, the courage, and the power to become our Savior, the Christ, and, as Peter said in today's passage from Acts, "**Lord of all.**"

Jesus is Lord. These are the three simple words the first baptized Christians used to profess their faith. Before the nascent church became the religion of the empire that crucified Jesus; before the Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds enforced orthodoxy; before one single Latin word "**filioque**," which means "*and the Son*," was inserted into the Nicene Creed by the Western Church to support the dogma of double Procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and Son as one Principle opposing the theology of the Eastern Church that believed the Spirit proceeded from the Father alone split the Christian Church between east and west in 1054, baptized Christians were united around this simple and yet explosive confession of faith: Jesus is Lord of all.

Historian of Christianity Diana Butler Bass says, "**‘Jesus is Lord’ meant far more than ‘Jesus is my personal master.’ It meant, ‘If Jesus is Lord, Caesar is not.’**"<sup>8</sup> It meant that baptized Christians marked as Christ's own refused to fit into the old, divisive, destructive, violent and deadly categories of the world. It meant that people who passed through the waters of baptism chose the Lordship of Christ over everything else and they were willing to allow the Spirit that empowered Jesus to become Lord of their lives to reorder their priorities, change their ambitions, mold their living, shape their futures and inspire them to create good trouble in the world to make God's Kingdom more visible in human history. The very first Christians understood well that their baptism was much more than a religious ritual. They knew that giving their lives completely to the Crucified Lord carried not only theological but also social, economic and political connotations. If Jesus

was their Lord, then no other lord, no other institution, no other ideology, no other political party, no other religious leader, and no other dominant social, religious or racialized system would have their total allegiance or define their identity. Jesus was their Lord and the first Christians were committed to living as baptized disciples with their hearts and minds fully open to the Holy Spirit.

I love to imagine Jesus standing in the water to be baptized. Here is the One who knew no sin, God's love in human flesh, God's Beloved Child, getting in line with the rest of us who desperately need a change of heart and mind to turn toward God's love and open our lives to God's Spirit. As theologian Matthew Myer Boulton said it so eloquently, this is ***"an expression of the astonishing solidarity of the Incarnation: in Jesus, God comes alongside us, even to the point of joining us in a rite of repentance and renewal."***<sup>9</sup> But there is more to this baptism. There in the Jordan, Jesus undoubtedly hoped that his followers would be swept up by the Holy Spirit as he himself was swept up by the Spirit and was sent into the world embodying the news of God's saving love. Since ours is the faith of the loving Lord of radical solidarity into which we were baptized, then may we be bold enough in this New Year to proclaim that Jesus is Lord. Lord of our lives and Lord of the Church. May we give Christ our full attention and devotion in this New Year and seek to turn our church into a place where people wanna be because here they are known by their names and are invited, encouraged, equipped, challenged and empowered to open their hearts to the Holy Spirit and take back into the world with them the world-saving love of God revealed in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Friends, in a few minutes, I will invite you to come forward and receive water from the font, the same water we blessed and used in Marissa Rose's baptism. Andrew and I will put this baptismal water on your forehead as an invitation to you to remember your baptism and recommit to giving your whole life to our Lord Jesus Christ and letting God's Spirit empower you to live as a baptized Christian in the world. As you queue up for this ritual of affirmation of our faith in the Lordship of Christ and commitment to keep our hearts open to God's Holy Spirit, may you feel God's love and hear those words said to you – Liz, Bree, John, Joyce, Carol, Kathy, Linda, Jeff, Martina, Gay Rose, Heather, each of you here today in person or online, ***"you are a beloved Child with whom God is well please."***

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> By William Shakespeare in Romeo and Juliet, Act-II, Scene-II, circa 1599.

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 43:1c.

<sup>3</sup> By Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart Angelo, Where Everybody Knows Your Name, 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Matt. 28:19-20.

<sup>5</sup> John 3:22.

<sup>6</sup> John 4:1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 10:1-43, Acts 16:15, 1 Corinthians 1:16-18,

<sup>8</sup> Diana Butler Bass in Freeing Jesus, p. 121 [Kindle Edition].

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<sup>9</sup> Matthew Myer Boulton in Showings: SALT's Commentary for Epiphany and Jesus' Baptism, SALT, 02 January 2023 [<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2023/1/2/showing-forth-salts-commentary-for-epiphany-and-jesus-baptism>].