

Sunday Sermon January 11, 2026

Every year on the Sunday after the Epiphany, we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. Our Gospel passage for today is Matthew's account of Jesus baptism, and in spite of its brevity, it is dramatic and compelling.

After a little fight over whether Jesus should be baptized or not, John submits and Jesus is plunged into the muddy waters of the Jordan River. As He comes up out of the water, the heavens open, and the Holy Spirit descends like a dove and pours heavenly light on Jesus. Then a voice from heaven proclaims, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Wow – what a powerful moment. Jesus plunges in and heaven reaches down and touches the earth and proclaims Jesus God's beloved child. Who Jesus is has been proclaimed to the whole world, and it inspires him to begin his public ministry, living into His identity as God's beloved in all he says and does, in how he loves- God, neighbor and himself. A life-changing moment.

Now I must confess that the accounts of Jesus' baptism in the synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke -always make me a little jealous. I'm jealous because I have no memory of my baptism. According to the fading baptismal certificate I keep in a file cabinet, it happened 12 days after I was born. The only other evidence is a yellowing photograph of my godmother holding a blissfully sleeping Billy. It's entirely possible that I slept through the whole thing!

So I have always been jealous of Jesus and people who were old enough to remember their baptism.

Back in seminary, I did a hospital chaplaincy training program called CPE with a young woman who was baptized when she was 18. It took place in a small lake behind her church, and every year on the anniversary of her baptism, she goes back there to swim. She considers it another birthday, her new birth, and so she swims laps back and forth and reflects on how well she is living out the commitments she made in her baptism:

- To proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
- To seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
- To strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being? Commitments

She remembers having stood before God and the members of her church family and saying, “I will with God’s help.” So how am I doing?

This young woman took that commitment seriously. Her baptism had changed her. She had undergone a “metanoia.” She was now a follower of Jesus, called to live in certain ways. Called -sometimes- to live differently. Called to put flesh on God’s love each day. So she regularly reflects on how well she’s living out her new life in Christ.

This is how it was in the early church. The church did not begin baptizing babies until the Middle Ages when infant mortality caused the church to worry about the souls of unbaptized babies.

In the early church, it was adults who were baptized after a sometimes long period of formation and discernment. This formation was necessary because baptism was a serious commitment. It required making promises to some difficult and counter-cultural practices.

The early followers of Jesus committed themselves to pacifism. They would not retaliate or harm people who had harmed them. They would not engage in violence.

They also committed to sharing what they had so that no one would have too little, and no one would have too much. And they committed to radical acceptance and inclusion: the practice of seeing all people as God’s beloved children and treating them as such.

Peter speaks of this in the baptismal sermon he delivers in the reading from Acts today, he says: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality” as he prepares to baptize the gentile Cornelias.

“No partiality” - A counter cultural idea then and now. We cannot underestimate how radical and life-changing this kind of inclusion was.

In a tribal culture, filled with laws and rules about who was in and who was out, who was loved and who was not, Peter boldly proclaimed: “all people are beloved of God.”

Paul would go on to say to the Galatians “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” through our baptism. Our baptism makes us one. One with God in Christ, and one with one another in love.

For Jesus, and for us, baptism is the beginning of this new life – whether we remember it or not. Baptism seals us with the Holy Spirit and marks us as Christ’s own forever. Those are the words that are prayed as Chrism is placed on the forehead in the sign of the cross: “you are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever. It is an indelible mark, like one made with permanent marker- you are God’s own, God’s beloved, forever. Nothing can take that away.

Now- go out and live it. Live into that new life. Live into your baptism. Be a person of peace in a harsh and sometimes cruel world. Share what you have so that neighbors in need will have enough. See the Divine Image in yourself and in your neighbor – each and every one – for they are God’s beloved.

So whether we remember it or not, our baptism was life-changing. It made us who we are and calls us to live into that new life each and every day.

Amen