

IN-SPIRIT-ED

Order of Service (bulletin)

<https://www.spiritofhope.ca/news-and-events>

Video (recorded live stream)

<https://www.youtube.com/@spiritofhopeunitedchurch791>

January 11, 2026

Epiphany 1 - Baptism of Jesus

Isaiah 42:1-9

Here is my Servant, whom I uphold my chosen one, in whom I delight! I have endowed you with my Spirit that you may bring true justice to the nations. You do not cry out or raise your voice or make yourself heard in the street. So gentle that you do not break a bruised reed, or quench a wavering flame, faithfully you will bring forth true justice. You will neither waver nor be crushed until justice is established on earth, for the islands await your teaching! Thus says [Adonai], who created the heavens and spread them out, who gave shape to the earth and what it produces, who gave life to its peoples and spirit to its inhabitants: I, [Adonai], have called you to serve the cause of right; I have taken you by the hand, and I watch over you. I have appointed you to be a covenant people, a light to the nations: to open the eyes of the blind, to free captives from prison, and those who sit in darkness from the dungeon. I am [Adonai]! This is my Name! I will not yield my glory to another god or my praise to idols! See how former predictions have come true. And now I declare new things! Before they spring forth, I tell you to them.

Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. John tried to dissuade Jesus, saying, “I should be baptized by you, and yet you come to me!” But Jesus replied, “Leave it this way for now. We must do this to completely fulfill God’s justice.” So, John reluctantly agreed. Immediately after Jesus had been baptized and was coming out of the water, the sky suddenly opened up, and Jesus saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and hovering over him. With that, a voice from the heavens said, “This is my Own, my Beloved, on whom my favour rests.”



Does anyone remember the 1980ish commercial of an exasperated person stressed by the pressures of life: *Calgon, take me away*. I suspect that I am not the only one who has retreated to the comfort of the bathtub. Maybe you're cold and so a warm bath can warm you up. Maybe it's really hot and you want to turn on a cool shower. When we were kids, we would love to run through the sprinkler. When you're thirsty, nothing tastes as good as a cold glass of water. I love that scene in The Three Amigos where Martin Short and Steve Martin and

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg

Chevy Chase are riding their horses through the dry desert and Martin Short and Steve Martin have nothing but dust in their canteens. And then there is Chevy Chase who's got so much water that he's pouring it over his head and he's using lip balm and he and he just tosses the extra water onto the ground where it drips into the cracking soil. And we all could empathize with those who were thirsty.

We need a good snowpack in the winter to help kickstart spring and the spring growth. We need those April showers to bring May flowers or in our part of the world the May flowers to bring May showers to bring April and June flowers. I remember the first time that I visited Houston. My aunt and cousins lived there and coming out of the airport it was raining and it was the first time I'd ever experienced a rain that wasn't cold. It was a warm rain. I'd never experienced that before.

Now water is an imperfect image of course because we are not one of the species that is designed to be able to breathe underwater. And so sometimes water can be a sign of worry. We can have that image of trying to keep our head above water. It feels like that's an image that applies to a lot of people in the world we're living in right now. Just trying to keep your head above water.

We've just finished with Christmas. It's only been a couple of weeks since we read about baby Jesus being born. Last week, if you were in church, we heard about toddler Jesus being given some gifts and then with his mother and father moving to Egypt for a while and then eventually up to Nazareth in Galilee. Now, we could have read one more story about 12-year-old Jesus going down from Nazareth to Jerusalem and then getting lost and his parents having to come back and find him. But that story didn't show up in this year's set of readings. So we go straight from Jesus being in Egypt and then back to Nazareth.

And now we're jumping forward decades in the story of Jesus. Back to where the story of Jesus for some of our sharers of the tradition is where Jesus' story really starts: Jesus going to see John who is camped out by the Jordan River east of Jerusalem. All of the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John's gospel all mention Jesus going to John. Now, an actual baptism is only described in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But it's implied in the reading from the fourth gospel. John the Baptist is drawing on centuries of Hebrew tradition of the cleansing wash as a sign of recommitting oneself to their centering faith to preparing oneself to enter the sanctuaries of God of righting ourselves from the way the world kind of distracts us from our sacredness. The Hebrew tradition is filled with ritual washing times. And so John is building on that familiar imagery and he invites people to a new kind of ritual washing in the sacred river Jordan: inviting people to bring their flawed and longing self to the edge of the water and then going in the water being immersed into that water and then coming out taking a brand new breath and seeing yourself as a washed and new person. John used the language of repentance to go into the water one way and come out differently: going in a different direction. Repent simply means to turn around, to turn your life back to the sacredness that you were created to really be and know.

And so, Matthew, Mark, and Luke explicitly talk about Jesus going to John for baptism. And it was more than a water experience for Jesus. This was a spiritual experience as we heard today. As Jesus is coming out of the water, the storyteller says that Jesus saw the spirit of God coming down from heaven, hovering down from heaven. almost the same kind of language as the spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters of the deep from the first story in Genesis. Jesus sees this spirit hovering down toward him. And the best that the storyteller can do is to compare it to a bird. It's like a dove would come down for a landing. a gentle bird coming down for a gentle landing. Now, it's unclear from the text whether this was a unique experience that was only noticed by Jesus. In Matthew that we read today. It does say that it's Jesus who saw the spirit descending. And in Mark and in Luke, when the voice speaks, it speaks in the second person. It's speaking directly to Jesus.

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg

You are my beloved child. In you I am pleased. Matthew switches it to the third person so that the readers of the text can hear this proclamation for them. *This is my own beloved child on whom my favor rests.* Minimally this was the water of repentance experience for Jesus and then also a very personal spiritual anointing for Jesus, a commendation, an affirmation, an encouragement, a mission set on a path to go down. In today's reading and in Mark and Luke John the Baptist does not respond to this apparition of the spirit. The book of John is titled after a different John than John the Baptist; John the book, it's named after one of Jesus' followers, close disciples, a different John different than John the Baptist). John the book mentions, although it doesn't talk about the direct baptism, it says that John the Baptist mentioned that he once saw the spirit come down and rest on Jesus. And it quotes John saying that although He baptizes with water, Jesus would baptize with a Holy Spirit.

Following this experience with John at the Jordan River, Jesus eventually moves on and gains followers himself. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the story of the baptism is directly followed by Jesus going for a 40-day personal wilderness retreat and then coming back and the next thing is to gather disciples. It's fair to say that this time with John the Baptist inspired Jesus to also preach good news of turning around and turning to God like John had done.

Inspire is a Latin based word that means to breathe into: *inspirare*. *Spirare* means to breathe. It's a verb, but the noun that's associated with it is *spiritus*. And like the Greek word *pneuma* and the Hebrew word *ruah*, the Latin *spiritus* does mean spirit, but it can also mean the air or the wind or it can mean breath. *Spiritus*: wind, breath, spirit. To be inspired is literally to take the spirit in.

Being inspired can lead a person to do things that they maybe didn't think were possible. It gives us a permission to create, a permission to speak, to advocate. It gives us permission to grow and to learn and to change. Being inspired is like having a fire lit underneath us that makes us move. You know, Spirit of Hope's motto on the website, in our vision, on the windows, to learn, to change, to grow, encouraging us to move in new directions, to progress, to not stay where we are only living with what we've got at this moment. to expand to become something more. I mean that has a similar sentiment to Jesus and John saying repent, turn around, be something different, be something more. Inspiration is what sets us out on that path. Changing and growing and learning are always advanced because we feel inspired to be more, to be different, to be better. Now, it often may come to us from outside that we simply are, "Oh, I'm inspired. I don't know where that came from, but I now feel this calling." But often it has to be internalized first and discerned before we really begin to make it possible.

Inspire, breathe, new life for a new moment. Breathing is only impactful when we take it in and then let out a new breath that goes back into the world into the cycle of the breathing cycles of plant and animal of the world pulsing with life. Religious and spiritual dimensions are letting the spirit come in. Letting the spirit come to Jesus, then Jesus having that wilderness time of discernment, struggling with what this inspiration, what direction that might mean and how to live it out. And then finally, Jesus choosing the path, letting the inspiration guide. And so Jesus moves and empowers others, gathering followers and learners, disciples who will carry on that legacy with their moments of inspiration. John's gospel on the day that Jesus was arrested doesn't, like the other gospels, describe a last supper, a final communion. but is filled with Jesus' teaching. That's where we get the story of Jesus washing his disciples feet. But mostly it's Jesus teaching: preparing his disciples for life after Jesus' presence with them. Jesus describes the Holy Spirit. John uses the Greek word *paraclete* which literally means someone who will speak on your behalf in court like a lawyer or an advocate or a counselor. Helper is another word that is sometimes used to describe that phrase in John. Now, I have to admit that I'm not overly versed on the subtleties of the theology of the Trinity that God is one, but also traditionally three, father, son,

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg

and spirit. I am especially not well versed on the claims in some theological circles that these are distinct and there's certain roles with each one and that you can't mix up something the spirit does with something that Jesus does and that's all different from God, but they're all the same and they're all in the same package. I just take it as a metaphor for a diverse and a complex God that we experience and know in different ways. And I'm not worried about whether I am ascribing to Jesus characteristics traditionally left to the spirit or things that are with God as creator. When I read the paraclete versions in John's gospel, I hear Jesus saying, "You are currently finding a very meaningful connection to God with and through me. But if I wasn't here, you're not going to lose that because Aba God sends another advocate, another helper, another counselor, another paraclete to be with you forever. You're not only going to know God because you're with me."

The spirit of God can be thought of as that unseen but very impactful mysterious holy presence somehow in our midst. One who helps and who guides and teaches and supports us sometimes quite noticeably and other times without any fanfare and subtly and maybe we figure it out later. It can be and it is often for many people a desire for a journey of faith that we want to feel the mystery of God in our midst.

We want to be inspired. Now sometimes inspiration just happens. But for most of us, we need to create those moments for inspiration to take hold. Using the water imagery. A seed needs more than water. It's going to also need the right amount of warmth and most importantly nutrients that it will be gathering from the soil around it. And so we seek inspiration by inviting the spirit in.

Many people use intentional spiritual practices. Maybe people make time for conscious prayer. Some people let themselves shut out the world and meditate. Some people like to find inspiration in natural settings, getting away from all those things that are kind of human creations that can distract. Some create through art or music or written words. Sometimes people are inspired as they engage in physical activities that they find centering again like going out to the wilderness or meditating to set aside the rest of the world. Some people are inspired to take action for others to be advocates themselves to speak and work for important causes for justice. And we sometimes can reflect on books we've read, whether they are intentionally and explicitly spiritual or not, or movies we've seen or music we listen to, and ask ourselves, where is the divine in this? What am I hearing the spirit saying? I found myself with no shortage of ideas on the internet this week when I was thinking about, well, what kind of spiritual practices do people have? I found one website that listed itself as the ultimate guide to spiritual practices and then it said it had 200 plus disciplines for consciousness growth. I didn't get very far down the list, but there's something there for every single one of us and we may find a different practice that brings us inspiration at different points in our lives. Yes, inspiration does occasionally come to us unannounced, but we need to be masters of our own inspiration destiny... more often than not.

Jesus went into the water. He had to hold his breath. A few seconds later, he pops up and draws a fresh breath. And in that moment, inspiration comes to Jesus as God breathes into Jesus through that breath, a fresh purpose. Jesus feels valued. Jesus feels a holy companionship. And then... Jesus chooses that quiet discipline and isolation and discernment for several weeks. And then Jesus goes back to Nazareth. packs up his belongings, says goodbye to his family and friends, and heads to the Galilean Sea and finds a new place to rest his head in Capernaum, where he, like John the Baptist, invites people to be inspired by the nearness of the realm of God. And out of that inspiration, people follow and carry on that cycle of giving people reasons to be more than who they are.

Let's pray. Holy God, fill us with your spirit. Amen.

12TLUS Give Me a Name

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg