

Isaiah 42:1–9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34–43; Matthew 3:13–17 (NIV)

OPENER: Named...

Friends, if you want one sentence to hold onto today, it's this:

God names Jesus **beloved** before Jesus does any public work, and that's still how God works with us.

We live in a world that trains people to introduce themselves by output: what we do, what we produce, what we manage, what we've achieved, what we're worried about, what we're behind on.

And if we're honest, that pressure can creep into spiritual life too. It is like we're always auditioning...

But God's Word will not let us turn faith into an audition. Today we read about Jesus stepping into the Jordan, and before a sermon is preached, before a miracle is worked, before a cross is carried, God speaks opens the space with identity: **"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased"** (Matthew 3:17).

INTRODUCTION: Jordan is where Jesus identifies with us

John doesn't want to do it. He says, "You should be baptizing me." But Jesus insists, not because He needs cleansing, but because He is choosing solidarity. He is stepping into the human story all the way down to the waterline, this last ritual of preparing oneself for God's righteousness...

And here's a quiet holiness truth: the holiest person in the scene is the one who refuses to be superior.

Isaiah describes his vision of servanthood as gentle, justice without brutality, strength without crush. God says, **"A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out"** (Isaiah 42:3). Holiness is not harsh. Holiness is Christlike steadiness that refuses to damage what is already fragile.

So, Jesus goes into the water: not to perform, but to fulfill. Not to impress, but to obey. Not to stand above us, but to stand with us. That is our God... how wonderful. King, Judge, Priest and our Friend

MAIN POINT: Belovedness comes before assignment

If you only remember one order today, remember this one:

Beloved → Spirit → Sending.

Matthew says: Heaven opens. The Spirit descends. And the voice speaks: beloved.

The Gospel is not: “Get yourself together so God can love you.”

The Gospel is: God speaks love over you in Christ, and that love begins to gather your scattered life into wholeness.

This is where we need the church's tenderness and clarity. Some of us struggle to believe God could actually delight in us. We can accept forgiveness, maybe... but delight? Pleasure?

Scripture says it plainly over Jesus: **“whom I love... with him I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17)**. And that is the ground we stand on; in Christ... the ground we stand on is solid, not because we've earned it, but because grace has claimed us.

C. S. Lewis once described humility as the relief of not being so consumed with the self... It is like taking off a ridiculous costume we've been strutting around in.¹ And that's what belovedness does: it doesn't inflate the ego; it quiets it. It frees us from the exhausting project of self-justification. So that we can, what God intended us to be, is free... Free of being something we are not and just being alive in God's love.

The Spirit rests on Jesus, and the church learns its pace

Matthew says, **“the Spirit of God [was] descending like a dove and alighting on him” (Matthew 3:16)**. Notice: not a hawk. Not a warhorse. A dove.

The Spirit's presence is strong—but not frantic.

And that matters for how we live together, especially as a congregation. From a World-informed lens, people are pushed toward reactivity: quick fix, quick certainty, quick blame, quick control. But guess what leadership and community health depend on?²

We have said it for centuries: we don't have to fill every silence with noise. We can wait in the Light. We can practice a steadiness that is not avoidance, but attentiveness. Isaac Penington warns against rushing ahead of the Spirit, against trying to manage spiritual life by sheer impulse instead of patient obedience.³

So here is a very practical baptism-of-the-Lord invitation:

If your inner world feels chaotic, don't just “try harder:”

- Come back to the living water.
- Come back to the voice that speaks through the noise.
- Come back to the Spirit's dove-like pace.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

² Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007).

³ Isaac Penington, *Selections and Letters from the Works of Isaac Penington* (Philadelphia: Association of Friends for the Diffusion of Religious and Useful Knowledge, 1858).

TAKE-AWAY: In belovedness, we become a people who do good

In the Book of Acts, chapter 10, Luke gives one of the simplest summaries of Jesus' life and mission: **"God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power... and he went around doing good"** (Acts 10:38).

That's the fruit of belovedness. Not spiritual performance; just actual goodness in the world.

And because Epiphany is not only revelation-to-us but revelation-through-us, we ask: what does it look like for the church to live that same pattern?

One of my spiritual hero's, Paul Anderson, describes a "theology of presence" where Christian witness is not merely words spoken at people, but a life embodied among them; truth carried in the shape of faithful presence.⁴ That's holiness that shows up, stays near, listens well, and refuses to abandon people to loneliness.

So when you sing, when you pray, when you forgive, when you tell the truth, when you refuse to demonize your neighbor, when you show up for someone who is falling apart... this is not spiritual garnish. This is baptismal life.

CLOSING: A bridge from choir-song into open worship

Friends, the Marion Gospel Choir has helped us praise today. They've given us a gift: a reminder that the Spirit still breathes life into a room, still lifts the heart, still creates hope.

Now we're going to practice another gift: waiting worship.

Not empty time. Not awkward time. Holy time.

We wait because God is present.

We wait because God still speaks.

We wait because we are learning to recognize the voice that named Jesus—and names us in Christ.

So, here's the question I want to hand to your heart as we enter open worship:

Where are you still living like you must prove yourself... when the Father has already spoken love over you in the Son?

And here's the invitation:

Come to the water again today—not physically, but spiritually. Let God re-center you. Let the Spirit steady you. And let the life that follows be simple, faithful, and good.

Amen.

⁴ Paul N. Anderson, "A Theology of Presence," *Speaking the Truth* (1993)