



Sunday Sermon
January 11, 2026
The Rt. Rev. James R. Mathes

Baptism of Our Lord

Matthew 3: 13-17

*Come Holy Spirit: Touch our minds and think with them, touch our lips and speak with them and touch our hearts and set them on fire with love for you. **AMEN.***

All living things on our planet have it to live. Water is life. In the beginning, the spirit of God hovering over those waters. The seas parted so Israel could be freed from Pharaoh. Moses strikes a rock in the wilderness and water pours forth. Later, Elijah will strike the river with his mantle and cross the Jordan on dry land. Still later, Jesus will turn water into wine. At a well he promises a woman living water. And on the cross, water will flow from his pierced side. But I am skipping over today's gospel.

Jesus comes to a river, to John. Likewise, we wade in the water. A river flows through our lives with the waters of baptism. It is out of these waters that the gospel of Jesus Christ springs forth. Upon these waters, the spirit descends.

Water, a river, always seems to be flowing through God's life-giving encounters with God's people. And so, it is meet and right that it is at the river that Jesus should begin it all with John. And a river continues to flow through the life of God's people as we live into the way of Jesus. We are a people of water and spirit. Through our baptism, we are grafted into the continuing mission of God in Jesus Christ to restore all people and creation to the unity and goodness which God intends.

We boldly state on the front of our bulletin: Open Doors, Open Minds, Open Hearts, quintessentially a baptismal aspiration harkening back to Jesus in the Jordan, to our own baptism, to this water we will bless and throw about today. The waters of baptism push our doors, minds and hearts to break open. As those baptized, welcome is not a simple word tossed off. It is charged with meaning, power, risk, and hope. As we sang at the beginning of our worship,

Built of tears and cries and laughter Prayers of faith and songs of grace Let this house proclaim from floor to rafter

All are welcome, all are welcome (all are welcome)

All are welcome in this place (1)

At Jesus' baptism, the very doors of heaven are open—open doors, indeed. Through that celestial portal, God speaks: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Can our doors be anything but open?

Rising from the Jordan, Jesus sets out on his ministry of gathering disciples, of worshipping around a table upon which is set wine and bread, of teaching the Way of peacemaking and reconciling love, and of serving the least and the lost. Again, can we do anything else but follow his example?

No, the doors of this place are open so that we may gather all to receive God's grace, to learn of God's love, and to serve those who are bereft of hope who might be touched by God's healing balm.

All are welcome, all are welcome
All are welcome in this place.

Today, we return to the river, to water, to remember that this radical ministry of welcome, inclusion, love, and care that Jesus shows forth even to the cross is our ministry. We renew our baptismal covenant as we remember Jesus' baptism. We affirm who God is as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - creator, redeemer and sustainer. God is God the giver, who does not give up on us. God is God the redeemer who through Jesus brings us together as one. God is Holy Spirit who empowers and sustains us in this transformational work, even when we do not have the power to carry on. After acknowledging who God is for us, we make promises to God...to worship God, to reconcile, to tell the sacred story, to serve Christ by serving others, to be about justice and peace and to respect the dignity of every human being. This covenant is our charge to do the work of the Jesus; this is why the church exists.

Once upon a time there was a small town situated on a dangerous coast, where shipwrecks were frequent occurrences. Some of the townspeople decided to do something about all the souls being lost and they started a small rescue station with loyal members who kept constant vigil. Whenever a ship got caught on the shoals they would get in their little boat and search for survivors. Their success became legendary. Funds poured in and the station grew bigger. They even added a lighthouse to attempt to forestall disasters on the coast. Then a bigger rescue station was built. It became the custom for the members of the rescue society to refer to the station as the club house. They started doing other things not related to rescue - parties, games, and such. Over time they ceased going out on the water. And eventually the light simply went out when members stopped tending it. The shore became a perilous place once again. But they had a great community club house along the shore.

To be sure, that story is a cautionary tale for the church. For too long, the church has been comfortable for the comfortable. That is not the church of our baptism. Too often the church has been too rules bound and concerned about judging who should be let in and who should be closed out. That is not the faith of Jesus. Too often the church has been concerned about the survival of the institution. That is not the church of the resurrection. The church of our baptism, this church, is a rescue station.

We are a people of forgiving, a relentlessly loving God, a Jesus who heals and gives to all - no exceptions. As the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams once said, "The slogan of the church's life is "not without the other."

We must never forget that we are commissioned and called through our baptism to be a rescue society. Sometimes that rescue work happens right here. In these pews and chairs, we might find ourselves made uncomfortable, stretched or stressed by those with whom we gather in this place - it might be me! Or you might do it to me! When that happens, the spirit is saying

to us...here is where you live out your baptismal vows; here is where you seek and serve Christ. Here is where you respect the dignity of your fellow human being. The grace of the open door is that we place ourselves in a vulnerable place to be changed by Christ in the one whom we meet.

And because we are a rescue society, when the alarm sounds we go out - to meet Christ in the other out there - because there are people hungry, others who are homeless, someone is in crisis, dying, lonely. It seems scary to answer the call. But if we don't respond, what will happen to those in peril? When we answer the call, we bring saving, good news. As Desmond Tutu often said, the gospel is bread to the hungry, water to the thirsty.

Beloved, I know this is daunting. Being the people of Jesus is heavenly citizenship. It is not easy. Beginning a people of water and the holy spirit puts us in "solidarities not of our choosing." We don't get to choose our families. We don't get to choose the human family. What we do get to choose is who we will follow and who we will become. Through baptism, all are welcome in this place and into our hearts. No one is excluded from God's love or our love in Christ. Not easy, but the waters of life.

In this place, we practice being people of living waters. We go down to the river, our spiritual Jordan - the river from the basement of time and Scripture. We connect with water from the beginning of all things in that great flood even to this fount filled. We touch those waters today through promises renewed and water sprinkled and splashed about. For it is in that water that we find life. We touch ancient words of welcome, wholeness, love, and redemption—Words of the word made flesh, words that can become our words.

Eventually, all things merge into one, everyone is included. No one is left behind. It is our baptismal call, it is our mission of rescue, it is who and whose we are.

All are welcome, all are welcome
All are welcome in this place.

(1) "Let us build a House," Marty Haugen, 1994. ©1994 GIA Publications.