

The Baptism of Jesus – January 11, 2026

Matthew 3:13-17

Living Waters

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA*



Deejay Merchant (Uruguayan, 1979-), *Baptism of Christ*, 2016. Tempera and gold leaf on gessoed board, 40 x 30 cm.

Just last Sunday, we recalled the murderous brutality of Herod as his paranoia drove him to call for the massacre of small children. This week, the nation and the world has been rocked by yet another act of searing violence in the killing of Renee Nicole Good in Minneapolis in a continuing escalation of inhumanity in this nation. God grieves with all who are mourning. If you are like me, the spectrum of emotions is running rampant. God knows... and Jesus came among us in the flesh to show us... to remind us... that there is a better way. If you are like me, you have looked forward to coming to church today to be nourished and strengthened in Word and Sacrament... that we may go forth from this place a bit stronger, and with greater clarity about how we are to live our faith perilous times.

In a message this past week, Minnesota Bishop Craig Loya reminds us:

“As people of the Epiphany, our call is to stand in the midst of a world where Herod continues to flex and posture, not in outrage or with reciprocal violence, but gazing in wonder and expectation for the joyful manifestation of Jesus wherever the poor, the outsider, the weak, and the oppressed are to be found.Our Epiphany joy is not some naive and shallow notion that everything will be ok, when everything is so obviously not ok. Our Epiphany joy is the deep, defiant, revolutionary hope we have in the assurance that love is the most powerful force in the universe. Like the wise ones searching for Bethlehem, we wait, we watch, we follow where love leads, knowing that only God’s action in the world can finally and fully heal all that the lust for a false and hollow power had broken down, world without end.”¹

God has given us varieties of gifts, and with those gifts we are to follow Jesus in the way of love that is not timid or shy... but seeks lift up, heal and reconcile the brokenness in our world. Today, as we prepare to renew our baptismal vows, I pray that we can open our hearts ever wider to remember the strength and goodness of our identities as beloved ones who have been baptized into new life in Christ. Today, let us go to the heart of our faith where living waters call us to remember who we are... and to whom we belong...



¹ The Rt. Rev. Craig Loyola, “Episcopal News Service,” January 8, 2026

<https://episcopalnewsservice.org/2026/01/08/minnesota-bishop-invokes-story-of-herod-in-statement-lamenting-ice-killing-of-woman/>

The 12th century mystic and woman of many gifts and talents, Hildegard of Bingen, has said of baptism:

“Rivers of living water are to be poured out over the whole world, to ensure that people, like fishes caught in a net, can be restored to wholeness.”



Today we gather at the River Jordan where Jesus is about to receive baptism by water and the Holy Spirit. Let us go there and imagine this moment that marks the beginning of Jesus' three years of teaching and healing among us. The baptism could have been a simple immersion with John dipping Jesus' head just below the surface... the baptismal task accomplished. But that is not what I see. This important baptismal moment is more than a mere dribble on the forehead. I see Jesus rising from the waters with such powerful grace that the waters ripple through time meeting us where we are in this moment... in this place. Powerfully, Jesus rises... skin glistening, beads of water flying... as his face draws heavenward to greet the light... a dove... and to receive a blessing. Matthew tells us:

“Just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’”

Today is all about water... that life-giving and death-dealing element in which we were formed... and through which we come to new life in Christ Jesus. Current liturgical guidelines about baptism encourage us to use “copious” amounts of water... the more water the better... so that we can experience the true physicality of baptism... a sacrament that is an outward sign of an inward and spiritual grace... a sacrament through which we are cleansed of our sins, die to our old life, and are raised up to new life in Christ.

Our modern traditions of baptism are quite tame compared with those of the early church. Jesus' baptism by John was a Jewish rite of purification and sign of repentance that was accomplished in a river. By the third century, the simple sacramental Christian rite of initiation... that had been instituted by Jesus... had developed some drama. In the early church, those who sought baptism would prepare for the sacrament with study and prayer for one to three years. During this time of preparation, the catechumens (as they were called)... would attend worship with a faith community... but would leave worship before the Eucharist. Baptisms took place once a year on the holiest day of the year, Easter. Baptism is an entry into the great Paschal mystery through which Christ died, was buried, and was risen... Through that great mystery... in the sacrament of baptism with Christ... we are freed from the shackles of sin and death.

In the darkness of night, before the Easter sunrise, the greatly anticipated baptismal rite would begin... a rite that would forever mark a turning point in the lives of those being initiated and welcomed as full members of the baptismal community. The service would begin with catechumens demonstrating their penitence by confessing their sins while standing on a hair shirt. After renouncing “Satan, his works and his pomp,” catechumens would turn facing west, the direction of death, the direction in which the sun sets over the horizon. They would then turn their bodies towards the east where the sun rises, the direction of new life and resurrection. As dawn

began to break with the sun rising in the east, professions of faith would be made... with vows that were very similar to the ones we will be renewing following the sermon... vows that, as you may know, evolved into the Apostle's Creed.

Men and women were baptized separately. As full disrobing was required, and modesty was a concern, women would be baptized by women and men by men. Three steps would lead the initiate down into the baptismal pool, the three steps representing Jesus' three days in the tomb. Many of the early baptismal pools were created in the shape of a casket or a large sarcophagus representing death to the old life. After being fully immersed... in the name of the "Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit"... the newly baptized would emerge from the baptismal waters. A jar of perfumed oil would be poured over their heads and rubbed all over their bodies before the newly baptized were dressed in a gleaming white garment and ushered into the main worship space that was lit with the new fire of Easter. The newly baptized would then be greeted by the community and invited to share their very first Eucharist. To this day, The Great Vigil of Easter is considered the optimum time for baptism... though we also baptize on Easter Sunday, the Sunday of Jesus' baptism, on Pentecost, on All Saints Sunday, and during the visitation of the bishop. Today, we will renew our vows and feel blessed water on our skin reminding us of the new life we have received in baptism.

Immediately following baptism with water, the forehead is anointed with holy oil in the sign of the cross. During the anointing, the priest says, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." A baptismal candle... that has been lit from the large paschal candle that is the light of Christ... is then given to the newly baptized. With the giving of a baptismal candle comes the pronouncement: "receive the light of Christ," a message meaning that the bearer of that light is empowered to bring that light out into the world. ...and that is what we are called to do each and every day... wherever we may be.

I would like to tell you about a family who had their baby daughter baptized one summer in a local Episcopal church. After a lovely service, the family invited friends and relatives back to the house to celebrate. They had a cookout in the backyard where kids played games and adults sat in folding chairs eating off paper plates. The four-month-old was left in her stroller to nap. When Mom put the girl down for bed that night, she noticed that the baby was sunburned from being outside... but she was only burned in one spot, right in the middle of her forehead... where there was a crimson cross in the very place where the child was anointed with holy oil following her baptism and words "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." Apparently, the oil had acted like a kind of "anti-sunscreen" creating the red cross.

For the next ten days, wherever they went, the girl's parents had to explain the cross to neighbors, to friends, to clerks at the grocery store and even to their pediatrician. For those ten days, the girl was literally and publicly marked as Christ's own forever.²

Baptism is a way of life. As the wonderful professor of Christian faith formation, Charles Westerhoff, reminds us:

² From a homily by The Very Rev. Randy Hollerith, Dean of the Washington National Cathedral during a service of morning Prayer, January 2, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yBAUziukpw>

*“When we are baptized, we become a Christian,
we then spend the rest of our lives learning to be a Christian.”*

But there is much more to the story. When we are baptized, we are baptized not merely as individuals, but into a community that... together... seeks to follow the Way of Jesus. As a community we make our way from the baptismal font to the holy table to be fed with the bread of life and strengthened for our faithful work in the world. Being church means being in relationship with others who have encountered the love of God known in Jesus... a community of faith that is sent forth from worship to be the hands, the heart, and the voice of God's love in the world. It has been said,

*“We will never change the world by going to church.
We will only change the world by being church.”*

And that, my friends, is what we strive to be... God's living church... not separate from the world... but in the world... a community of faith that supports one another as we seek build bridges, heal wounds, stand up for justice, care for God's creation, and to roll up our sleeves and engage in the project of calling world to LIFE.

As we prepare to renew our baptismal vows...

Let us make a sign of the cross on our foreheads...

...as we remember who we are

.... and to whom we belong...

...that we may live our lives with courage and faithfulness

...as we offer our ourselves

...in witness and in service

...to Jesus' Way of reconciling love.

Amen...