

Baptism: Just The Beginning

The Rev. Amy Spagna

January 11, 2026 – The Baptism of our Lord

Matthew 3:13-17

May I have a show of hands: who here remembers their baptism?

It's not surprising that there's so few hands. Most of us are baptized as infants, before our brains can put down the pathways leading to those memories, and before we can make those vows on our own. Historically speaking, the practice of baptizing infants wasn't common until the Middle Ages. Then, thanks in part to high infant mortality rates, it was seen as a hedge against any chance that an innocent child could somehow find themselves committed to purgatory or hell because they hadn't received the assurance their sins were forgiven when they died. Fortunately, we've learned a lot more about how to keep infants and small children alive since then. So too has the Church's collective thinking on the matter shifted. We *want* children to be full participants in the life of the community – and we *want* to support them as they grow and learn about what it means to be followers of Jesus. As the promises we make to that effect every time we baptize someone strongly suggest, our actions and our words matter enormously in teaching our faith and putting it into action. Hold onto that thought.

The impact baptism has on each of us is deeply profound, whether we remember it or not. Just as it did for Jesus himself, it marks the formal beginning of one of the most important relationships we'll ever have. It's more than just a ritual washing away of sin. It's how God, through Christ, stakes a claim on us. We are God's beloved, in whom God is well pleased. With that designation comes the privileges of forgiveness and being part of a community which will support us, no matter what; and the responsibility to love our

neighbors, or at the very least to act like we do, even if we don't like them very much at times.

Today's gospel reading, which features Jesus' baptism, puts us right back on the banks of the Jordan. John the Baptist is hard at work, preaching and baptizing people in the river as a marker of forgiveness. Jesus just kind of shows up with the rest of the crowd and, shockingly, asks John to baptize him, too. No matter which version of the story we read, it just kind of happens, and God responds in kind: "...a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased'" (Mt 3:17, NRSV).

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all report this event in nearly identical terms. Mark does so without any embellishment, breathlessly reporting that, "this thing happened, and THEN Jesus went off into the wilderness by himself for forty days." Luke wants his readers to know that Jesus was just a regular guy in the crowd who'd come to hear John preach. Nobody would have been any wiser to his special status, except for the appearance of the Holy Spirit and the voice from heaven. Only Matthew tries to provide an explanation for why Jesus insists that John – who would have been lower in their society's pecking order than Jesus was – has to be the one to baptize him in this way. When John asks why, Jesus answers that it "... is proper... to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt 3:15). Matthew doesn't unpack that right away, but it's enough to convince John to go ahead, despite his initial reluctance to do so. This highlights John's earlier statement that "one who is more powerful than I is coming after me" (Mt 3:11). It also signals that John knows exactly who Jesus is.

Of more importance in this moment, however, is the idea of "fulfilling righteousness" which is one of the major themes throughout Matthew. Andrew McGowan, the current dean of Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, notes that, "'Righteousness' is a loaded word, and our assumptions about it may not quite help us to grasp the point here. Matthew uses it a lot — not least in the Beatitudes and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount (five times in chapters 5-7). Those cases are very important, because they indicate that 'righteousness' is far more than keeping rules; it means the kind of disposition or reality described in the Sermon, as well as (we shall see) here, and even prior to this in Matthew's narrative... [it means] exceeding what was required by rules and acting with compassion... [Jesus' baptism] needs to happen, and in the very fact of his submission to John it shows us something about 'righteousness,' about the reign of heaven, and about what it really means to be the beloved Son of God. More than just being 'the script needs to be followed,' Jesus' act of submission to John's baptism, and hence his solidarity with all those preparing for the reign of heaven, is in keeping with what he will across his teaching and ministry show to be the character of the reign of heaven, which is - righteousness. Righteousness is God's saving mercy. To fulfill all righteousness for Jesus will not end here, but it begins here."¹

Likewise, for us, baptism is a beginning. There have been a lot of arguments over the centuries among theologians and pastors alike about exactly what happens in the moment the water hits us and the presider speaks the words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Some theologians focus on

¹ Andrew McGowan, "Fulfilling All Righteousness: The Story Begins." <https://abmcg.substack.com/p/fulfilling-all-righteousness-the> [accessed January 6, 2026].

"regeneration" – i.e., that human nature is restored somehow to the perfect state it enjoyed before Eve and Adam ate a particular piece of fruit and were thrown out of the Garden of Eden. Some focus only on salvation – as in, "do this, you're in good with God for ever." Still others take a tack more like Paul does in Romans 6, where he says that, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?... For if we have been united in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Rom 6:3-6). In other words: baptism makes us full participants in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, period, and with all the privileges and responsibilities which come with it.

Those privileges and responsibilities are laid out in the context of the Baptismal Covenant, which you can find beginning on page 304 in the Prayer Book. Along with the Apostles' Creed – a statement of faith which dates back to probably fourth or fifth century, and has been included in some form in the baptism service in the Prayer Book since 1552 - there are five questions which are meant to cover the basics of how we live, or promise to help someone else live, into the new reality of a life in Christ. They are:

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

The answer, in every case, is: I will, with God's help. And that is good news: just Jesus relied solely on God for help, and was assured he wasn't acting or speaking alone, so too can we be assured we are not alone.

In these five questions, and our response to them, we find an antidote to all the hate, division, and despair that's out in the world right now. It sounds simplistic. It is also a clear statement of where our commitments as Episcopalian Christians lie – things like ensuring our neighbors have enough to eat and treating them with kindness, even when we disagree with their words and actions. While they may not stop people from doing bad things, these small words and actions are the seeds for the hope we so desperately need right now. Its existence was made clear in the instant Jesus came up out of the Jordan and heard the voice from heaven say, "You are my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased. That hope is also infectious. With God's help, it is what gave rise to the movement called the Church... and which will, again with God's help, be the thing which will enable us to move forward with the wisdom and courage required to live through these uncertain and unsettled times.