

“God’s Beloved Community”

January 11, 2026

Scripture: Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17

What happens in baptism? It’s one of those questions many of us are a little hesitant to venture answering. Our tradition uses a variety of images to talk about the effect of baptism. In our Book of Common Worship we’re told: “The Sacrament of Baptism holds a deep reservoir of theological meaning, including dying and rising with Jesus Christ; pardon, cleansing, and renewal; the gift of the Holy Spirit; incorporation into the body of Christ; and a sign of the realm of God.” That’s a lot of things to think about if you’re a parent presenting a child for baptism. Because that’s another element of our tradition: we baptize babies. There’s a reason for that we’ll explore a little in a minute, but for now let’s look at the act itself.

When we baptize we use water as a symbol of God’s renewing, cleansing presence. Have you ever been really thirsty, maybe on a hot day after working in the yard or after a workout or a long walk, there’s nothing like water to rejuvenate you and soothe that dry, hot feeling in your throat. Medical science tells us we can go a pretty long time without food, but very little time without water. Our bodies absolutely need water to survive. So, it’s no surprise that ancient people saw water as sacred, as holy. And used water as a medium for conveying the Divine Presence.

But water, in certain forms, also represents boundaries. When you look at a map of the United States, for instance, how many of the states are separated by rivers? Around here the boundary between the U.S. and Canada is the Niagara River. We use rivers and the water they carry as liminal spaces. That’s why John the Baptist was at the Jordan. The Jordan River represents a crossing over from one life to another. In the Book of Joshua, that records the Israelites passage into the Promised Land, it’s at the Jordan that they stop while Joshua commands them to make a choice, to decide if they will stay with the gods of Egypt or embrace the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and follow Torah.

So, it’s no accident that John the Baptist chooses the Jordan for his ministry of baptism. He’s out there inviting the people around him to make a choice, to embark on a new journey and be prepared for the coming of a new era. We may find it a little strange that Jesus joins these pilgrims to receive baptism along with them. And in Matthew’s gospel, John is portrayed as pointing that out. But Jesus’ answer provides some insight into how he understands his calling. He has no desire to be set above others or to be treated with special privilege. He is one of them from the very start.

For Jesus that experience also carried with it an affirmation. He sees the heavens open and hears God’s voice. That’s not something others around him see or hear. This is meant for him alone and it confirms that he’s on the right path. It’s not because of the act of baptism that God acknowledges Jesus; baptism is just a conduit, a medium for God’s presence. Another way we talk about the sacraments, baptism and communion, is to call them a “means of grace.” Through them we acknowledge God’s presence in a special way.

And that's why we baptize infants in our tradition. Even though Jesus is an adult at his baptism and there are other Christian traditions that insist on adult baptism, we have chosen to retain infant baptism. That's partly because in the stories of the New Testament, especially in Acts, we find household being baptized and not just individuals. But it's also because we believe that entry into the community of faith through baptism is meant for everyone, regardless of their age. I like to think of this as our acknowledgment of God's choice for us even before we can make a choice for God. Just as Jesus is identified in his baptism as God's beloved, we are claimed by God. We belong to God from our first breath and our baptism affirms our awareness of that relationship.

In the Church's history, unfortunately, baptism has come to be seen as a barrier, instead of a boundary. It's been used as a way to keep certain folks out rather than being seen as our affirmation that everyone is in. We use baptism to acknowledge something that is true for all God's people, not to separate ourselves from certain people. And because we have accepted our identity as God's beloved, we can see others as God's beloved as well.

In Isaiah we hear God praising the Servant, God's chosen, who will bring forth justice. But notice what that means. It doesn't coercion or submission. We're told, "a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench." One way to think about that description is to say God's chosen will not go after the weak or the vulnerable, but will seek justice on their behalf. This is not a world where only the strongest survive. Recently, following the takeover of Venezuela, one government official claimed: "We live in a world, a real world, that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power. These are the iron laws of the world since the beginning of time." Isaiah would beg to differ. The chosen one in whom God's soul delights does not act through force or strength or power, but through compassion to be "a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."

Baptism isn't meant to divide us or to separate us from the world; it's meant to remind us we are all God's beloved. We are God's beloved community. And when we see people who are vulnerable being attacked or belittled because of their skin color or immigration status or gender identity or any of the other categories we use to divide ourselves, our identity as God's own is being denied. And when we engage in those behaviors, privately or as a society, we are rejecting God's call on us to be a light to the nations, to fulfill righteousness.

It's easy, though, to lose our way. The figure in Isaiah was necessary because even God's people lost their way and were in danger of following a path that would lead them away from God's love. Jesus enters the Jordan with John to show us the path we're called to follow as God's beloved community. That's why from time to time it's a good thing to remind ourselves who we are. We don't re-baptize in our tradition; we believe baptism is a once and for all sacrament. But we do renew our baptism. Now and then it's good to remind ourselves through anointing and affirmation that we are truly God's beloved and we are claimed as God's own.

This morning you're invited to do just that. In a moment you'll be invited to come forward and receive anointing on the forehead and an affirmation of your identity as God's own. We all are God's beloved, even if you have not been formally baptized. So, there may be some

here who have not been baptized as children or adults. Understand, that does not make you any less God's beloved. You're invited to come forward as well and receive anointing and be affirmed. Perhaps sometime down the road you'll be interested in being baptized into the community of faith, that's entirely up to you. Today, in this moment, I want you to know you are God's own, God's beloved and you belong in God's beloved community.....