

Sermon for January 11, 2026
Highland Presbyterian Church
Sermon texts: Matthew 3:13-17,
Isaiah 42:1-9
Sermon by: Rev. Adrian White

Is there a more evocative image in all of scripture than the way Matthew describes the moment John brings Jesus up from the waters of the river Jordan? The heavens open, and the spirit of God descends like a dove to land on him, and the voice of God rings out in love and delight. Our dear August captured it beautifully in her drawing for our bulletin cover today — it really took my breath away when I first saw it, with the scale and vividness of the dove, the closeness of the heavens, the water rolling and flowing. This scene is so special and so important that it's one of the few stories that all four gospels capture, without too many differences between them. This is the moment when God proclaims publicly who Jesus is; it's the moment when Jesus embraces his vocation and purpose. God seals Jesus in love, and Jesus emerges, knowing all that lies before him, and receives that love.



I remember my own baptism, just barely. I was six years old when I stood next to my older brother and our parents on the chancel of the church that raised me, Preston Hollow Presbyterian in Dallas. Pastor Elizabeth had explained what would happen and why, and I can't pretend that I remember the details, but I remember that it felt important, and I remember that I wanted to be like Jesus, who had been baptized, and like my Sunday school friends, who had been baptized as babies. Baptism meant I would be part of the church in a new way. I stood tall, ready to answer Pastor Elizabeth's questions in front of the whole

congregation. It happened so fast! I remember how loved I felt, by God who claimed me as God's own, and by the congregation that promised to nurture me and be my family.

The other thing I remember is that I was *wet*. I had known what would happen, but it hadn't fully registered that my regular head was going to have regular water on it, and that I would be wet in the regular way. I don't know, maybe I expected it to be like, more...magical? I had never experienced something that was so special and so ordinary at the same time. Looking back, I think in my young mind, I actually got the most important parts about baptism: God loves us, we belong to each other, and sometimes we get wet.

Now, when I have the indescribably beautiful blessing of talking to people who are considering baptism for themselves or their children, I usually talk about it as an action requiring three roles. There's what God does, in extending grace and love to creation and seeking to be in relationship with us; there's what the one being baptized does, or their parents on their behalf, in embracing and witnessing to the saving power of God's claim on our lives; and there's what the community does, in receiving the newly baptized and promising to nurture them in faith and walk with them in life.

If God wanted to love us, forgive us, save us, and defeat the power of sin in our lives and the world, God could do that without getting any liquids involved. But baptism teaches us a great deal about the nature of our God, for it requires our participation in the sacramental work of baptism. It calls not just for our faith, our intellectual comprehension or our spiritual longing; in baptism, we put our bodies into the mix, letting ourselves encounter the water, letting God's Spirit encounter us in a new way. It's at once totally mysterious and perfectly simple.

While in Divinity School I became a bit obsessed with a baptismal catechism attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem, a fourth century bishop. Very niche, I know. But hear these words from Saint Cyril about what he believes happens in baptism:

What a strange and wonderful thing! We did not literally die, we were not literally buried, we did not literally rise again after being crucified. We experienced these things only in symbols and representations; but salvation we experienced literally. Christ was really crucified and really buried and literally rose again, and all of this he did for our sake, so that by sharing his sufferings in imitation we might gain salvation in truth. What unmeasured love this showed for mankind!

It's such a beautiful articulation of the incarnate work of God through Jesus, but what captured my imagination most when I studied this is the past tense of the writing. You see, Cyril delivered this lesson about what happens in baptism only *after* the baptism itself had already taken place. Cyril invited people to experience bodily the baptismal waters, then sought to help them understand what happened, and why, and what it means. What we do with our bodies matters in our life of faith. We know this must be true because God chose to have a body in order to know us, to accompany us, to truly be with us even in a world that contains so much suffering.

What we do with our bodies, how we live, is as critical as any prayer we could say or any scripture we could inscribe on our hearts. The spiritual and the embodied exist in harmony, and we need both for there to be any hope of a song.

I said at the beginning that the story of Jesus's baptism appears in all four gospels with relative consistency. But they do each have their distinctions. Only in Matthew do we have the dialogue between Jesus and John, where Jesus asks John to baptize him and John is scandalized, insisting that surely Jesus should baptize him. Jesus has no need of a baptism of repentance, for he is the savior, God's chosen, without sin. Yet Jesus chooses for himself to be in solidarity with sinners — with us — by choosing baptism, by insisting on joining the numbers of those who have been immersed in water by John, forecasting the promise of baptism for all of us when he emerges to the overwhelming, unquenchable love of God.

In baptism, we follow Jesus into the water, into the tomb, into a new life marked forever by God's love. We let ourselves be covered by the same water that covered Jesus so that we might be transformed to follow him. Through baptism, God expresses God's astounding promise of grace; through baptism, we acknowledge our calling to serve God, which means we must follow Jesus in the hard and holy path of shaping our lives in solidarity with God's people, especially the poor and marginalized, the stranger and the prisoner.

It's a serious commitment, because solidarity is not always safe. It certainly did not make Jesus safe from censure, persecution, and a cruel and violent death. Even after his baptism he did not have more than a moment of peace, for he is immediately whisked away to be tempted for 40 days in the desert, so that evil might probe if he really means it. His divinity is tested and his humanity is put through the wringer.

But he completes this ordeal, and he immediately goes back to getting closer to people. He calls disciples to accompany him and begins healing and teaching and calling for the radical upending of the world order, promising the kingdom of heaven to the poor and the inheritance of the earth to the meek and other wild things that terrified the powerful and wealthy who had no interest in being changed to take part in this different, greater world.

Jesus shows us over and over that solidarity doesn't come from obligation or fear. So where do we find it? In one possibility, the poet Ross Gay writes that "joy is an ember for wild and unpredictable and transgressive and unboundaried solidarity." In other words, our urge toward solidarity comes not from our despair but from our joy, from the part of us that is most alive, most loved, and most loving. For us as followers of Jesus, God's solidarity with us is sealed in our baptisms, through which God calls us to beautiful, nourishing, liberating solidarity with one another. If the ember of joy leads to the spark of solidarity, then from that spark comes transformation.

German liberation theologian Dorothee Solle writes in *Choosing Life*, "I believe that the strongest sign of the new life is solidarity. Where there is solidarity, there

is resurrection. When we break the neutrality of silence and abandon our complicity with injustice, the new life begins.”

New life begins at the free community meal, where someone hungry becomes full and strangers become friends. New life begins among skilled and willing people who gather together to resist the abduction of their immigrant neighbors, aware of the risks and yet confident that inaction poses a far greater risk to one another and to our souls. New life begins in protest chants sung at the top of our lungs, and in whispered comfort at someone’s bedside. New life begins with eye contact on a street corner, with learning kind words in a new language, with writing a letter to someone who is lonely or afraid, with the collective impact of efforts big and small. New life begins when we find people to join hands with and let them change us for the better, so that together we can break open the divisions between heaven and earth and let peace and justice through.

Because friends, I still believe that these three things are true: God loves us, we belong to each other, and we might get wet. In our bodies, in the world, it is not always warm and dry. But it is in the water that we find our purpose. It is from the water that new life emerges, unquenchable, beloved. Thanks be to God. Amen.