

Sunday, January 11, 2026
First Sunday after the Epiphany – Baptism of Our Lord (Year A)

Matthew 3.13-17

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“Solidarity”

The Sunday immediately after Epiphany is always the celebration of the Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Baptism being one of the three traditional focal points for Epiphany. One of the three images of how Jesus’ identity as the Son of God is manifest. The others being the visit of the Magi which we celebrated last Sunday; and Jesus’ first miracle of changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana, which we only hear once every three years. Being such a focal point for the manifestation of Jesus as God’s Son, and also serving as the initiation of Jesus’ public ministry, as his commissioning for ministry, we hear of his baptism in all four Gospels. While John’s Gospel really only contains what is a passing reference at best with John the Baptist merely noting that he baptized Jesus, the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—contain actual accounts of the event. But of these three, Matthew’s account which we hear today differs ever so slightly, albeit in a significant way. Actually, in two ways. Let this be a bit of a teaser. We’ll get there in due course.

But first, we need to take a step back. We actually had the run-up to today’s account of Jesus’ baptism a month ago, on the Second Sunday of Advent. The Gospel for that day was the first 12 verses of Matthew Chapter 3, where John the Baptist is first introduced as appearing in the wilderness, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Matthew goes on to note, “This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’” (Mt 3.2-3). Matthew goes on to talk about how John was preaching a baptism of repentance, of the need for people to turn their lives around in preparation for the coming of God’s Kingdom. In preparation for the coming of the Messiah, the one who would bring salvation and liberation. As John says, “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Mt 3.11).

The next thing we hear in Matthew’s account is what we heard this morning: “Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him.” The One whom John had just been talking about, the One whom John foretells as being the long-awaited Messiah, shows up at the Jordan River wanting to be baptized. Regardless of which account of the baptism we hear, there is always an unspoken question: “Why?” A question that has been uttered silently or aloud by the faithful for two thousand years. And a question that even John the Baptist himself has. Unlike in Mark and Luke’s accounts, Matthew’s account actually has John giving voice to this question: “John would have prevented [Jesus] saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’” The first way Matthew differs from the other Synoptic accounts. Neither Mark nor Luke record John asking a comparable question.

John has a point. There is absolutely no reason—or no apparent reason—why Jesus needs to be baptized. First off, baptism was a rite typically reserved for Gentile converts to Judaism. Jesus is

a Jew, so no need for conversion. Now, of course, we are told in Matthew that John's baptism was largely targeting those who were already Jewish. Why did they even need baptism, let alone Jesus? John covers that earlier (what we heard a month ago) that everyone, including Jews, need to undergo a baptism, a complete conversion, in preparation for the coming of the Messiah: "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'" (Mt 3.9). That claims of being descended from Abraham, of being Jewish by birth, are not sufficient. All require conversion, not just the Gentiles. So, again, why does Jesus need to be baptized in preparation for the coming of the Messiah if he IS the Messiah? Again, no need for conversion. If anything, as John implies, Jesus should be the one doing the baptizing, even baptizing the Baptizer.

So why DOES Jesus get in line with the rest of the crowd seeking to be baptized? As Jesus himself tells John, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Righteousness simply meaning living in right relationship with God and others, in a way that reflects the attributes and characteristics of God that are an inherent part of who we are those made in the image and likeness of God. Seeking to do this through just, ethical, and holy actions. Being the Son of God, being one with God, Jesus is already in right relationship with God. But in wanting to be baptized Jesus is making a public statement of his commitment to being faithful to God's will and purposes. A public affirmation of the type of Messiah he intends to be. A public affirmation of what the Incarnation is meant to be about. As one commentator notes quite eloquently and succinctly:

It's an expression of the astonishing humility and solidarity of the Incarnation: in Jesus, God is with us, even to the point of joining us in a rite of repentance, confession, and renewal. Following a teacher like this would mean setting out with him on that path of humility and solidarity, truthfulness and grace, the way of love with which God is "well pleased." The way of companionship. The way of accompaniment . . . God with us, and us with God and neighbor.¹

This example of humility and solidarity, of truthfulness and grace, of the way of love and companionship exemplifying what Jesus means by the proper way for himself and all who follow him "to fulfill all righteousness." To live in right relationship with God and one another. In his baptism, Jesus models this right relationship, assents to upholding right relationship, and invites us into right relationship. The first step for those so moved and so called is to demonstrate their willingness through their own baptism, their own act of assenting and committing to right relationship with God and one another.

In response to Jesus' assent, to his committing to God's will and God's purposes in his own life and ministry by being baptized, God makes his response. "And when Jesus had been baptized, 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.'" This is the second way Matthew's account of the baptism differs from those of Mark and Luke. All do record a similar scene. However, both Mark and Luke clearly state that God says, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased" (Mk 1.11, Lk 3.22b). God speaking directly to Jesus. While Matthew specifically speaks to those witnessing Jesus' baptism: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well

pleased.” God’s public affirmation of what Jesus has done. God’s commissioning Jesus for the public ministry to which he has been faithful in accepting. Adding even greater weight than the private assent given in the other Gospels. Making a clear statement that God himself is in solidarity with Jesus and with those he travels alongside: that God is in solidarity with us in this desire to establish and maintain right relationship. In this, God’s words are not just an assent, but also an invitation to us. God’s words are not just a commissioning of Jesus, but also a commissioning of us to engage and be partners in God’s holy work. All who are baptized, by the very act of their baptism, have assented to God’s invitation, to God’s call to be in solidarity.

In a few moments, we will baptize three of God’s beloved children into the broader circle of holy work and holy life that we collectively refer to as the Body of Christ. In so doing, Morgan, Ozzie, and Roberto will be giving their assent—or rather, being minors, assenting by proxy through their parents and baptismal sponsors who will seek, along with our entire parish family—to guide them into a way of being characterized by humility and solidarity, trusting in God’s truthfulness and grace, to engage in the way of love and companionship that Christ modeled for us through his baptism and through his ministry.

In the baptismal rite, those of us already baptized will once again reaffirm our own baptismal vows, reminding us of what we committed to when we first assented to God’s invitation at our baptisms. Giving us an opportunity to recommit to the promises we made when we first affirmed our desire to be in right relationship with God and one another. When we were commissioned to be partners with Christ in his work of love and companionship. We do this not only as a recommittal of our own baptismal covenant. We do this in solidarity with Morgan, Ozzie, and Roberto. We do this in solidarity with Christ, who first was baptized to be in solidarity with us.

In this rite of baptism, in the renewal of our own baptismal vows, we, through the mystery of God’s time, are taken back to that moment two thousand years ago, when Jesus was baptized. Establishing the model, acting in solidarity with each who would faithfully follow suit, down through the ages. As we conclude the baptismal rite in this place, if we look with the eyes of faith, we might just be able to see the heavens open. We might just see the Spirit of God descending like a dove, alighting on Morgan, on Ozzie, on Roberto, and on each of us. And if we listen very carefully, we just might hear a voice speaking to each of us, “This is my Daughter, this is my Son, this is my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

¹ “The Way of With: SALT’s Commentary on Jesus’ Baptism,” SALT, January 5, 2026.
<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/1/8/the-way-of-love-salts-lectionary-commentary-on-jesus-baptism>.