

**Baptism: God Promises Us New Life**  
**A Message by Janet Culbertson**  
**Shepherd of the Valley United Methodist Church**  
**January 10, 2021**

**Opening Prayer:**

Creator God, when everything first began, water became a symbol of refreshing, of washing away, of renewing. Through the waters of creation, you brought forth abundant life. We have gathered this day to remember Jesus' baptism, how your Spirit proclaimed that He was your beloved Son in whom you were very well pleased. Help us to dedicate our lives to you, to offer our best for you, to be of service to you by serving in your world.

AMEN

**Joys and Concerns:**

From Wanda C. her Aunt's surgery was postponed to the 6<sup>th</sup>. Gerry is feeling better, but weak and tired. Cousin Nancy is about the same.

From Janet, She is feeling much better, hoping to be able to get back into office next week.

Husband John, is much improved, tried to return to work, but it was too soon. He needs to regain strength and endurance.

Update on Jean. Jay says she is much improved. Finally getting around a lot easier.

**The Written Word:**

**Matthew 3:13-17**

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. 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."

**The Spoken Word:**

**Baptism: God Promises us New Life**

"New Year; new you": this is the message we get from pop culture year after year. We vow to make changes to our diet, exercise habits, or lifestyle, but in spite of those resolutions, most things stay the same. This may be cause for disappointment, but there is something that always stays the same that we can celebrate. God's promises to us do not change with the calendar or the latest fitness trend. Rather than focusing our energy and attention on making (or breaking) promises to ourselves, let's spend the first part of the new year appreciating God's unbreakable promises. Today we begin a six-week series titled "New Year, Same Promises" which is Adapted from *A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series*. This series invites us all to realize that our New Year's resolutions may come and go, but God's promises remain true.

Today is the day the church traditionally remembers the baptism of Jesus, and through the waters of baptism, we experience the promise of new life.

Jesus was baptized, not as a baby, but as an adult, as a sign that he was about to begin his work for God. Now we need to recognize from the start that Jesus didn't need to be baptized. In fact, some would say that no-one needs to be baptized. Now, bear with me. I do highly recommend it, and I think you'll see why, but there's nothing magic about it. There was a time when people thought you needed to be baptized or you couldn't be a Christian and therefore, of course, if you died, you'd go to hell. Many still believe that, but that isn't why we baptize people. You become a Christian by putting your faith and trust in Jesus Christ; by making him your Lord. And then He gives you new life. Baptism is a sign – a promise - that that new life has begun. We baptize children on the understanding that we're bringing them into the community of God's people.

But let's get back to Jesus and his baptism. Baptism is both; a symbol of washing and of new birth. It carries the idea that the old sinful nature is being washed clean. But it also signifies death and rebirth. Through the waters of baptism, we receive the promise of new life; a new start in serving God faithfully for the rest of our lives. It reminds us that Jesus died and rose again to bring us new life. So, there's both the idea of the removal of sin, and of the old sinful life being replaced by a new life for God. Now the problem with both those ideas, as far as Jesus is concerned, is that he didn't need to do it for either reason. So why did he do it? Well, because he did need to do it.

Even John the Baptist didn't think Jesus needed to be baptized. He said to Jesus, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" John understood Jesus' importance in the scheme of things. He'd said a few verses earlier that Jesus was the promised Messiah whose sandals John wasn't even worthy to carry. But it wasn't just that. More importantly, baptism signifies being washed clean from sin, and Jesus had never actually sinned. The reason John was baptizing people was to purify them before the Messiah came so they'd be ready. Up to this moment John's message has been one of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

What's more, Jesus didn't need a new start in obeying God because he had always obeyed God. So, that still leaves the question, "Why did he need to do it?"

### **Why did Jesus needed to be baptized?**

Jesus answer was this, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." There was a sense in which Jesus **did** need to be baptized. He says it's to fulfill all righteousness. That is, to fulfill God's law. In the Message translation, Jesus says it like this, "God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism."

In his Gospel, Matthew is very intentional when he tells the stories. In the case of the story of Jesus birth, Matthew wanted to be clear that this child born was not some ordinary baby born out of wedlock to a teenage mother, but a child conceived by the Holy Spirit – one that God had planned for in a unique and miraculous way. So, in the telling of Jesus' baptism that we read today, Matthew takes time to include this conversation between John and Jesus that answers the inevitable question believers would have – if Jesus was without sin, why did he need to be baptized? The answer is that Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of what had been promised. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus' baptism is a reflection of that, as a part of fulfilling a plan set into motion long ago. After Jesus convinces John to actually baptize him, the heavens

break open. The Spirit of God descends like a dove in what I imagine to be a Hollywood inspired scene of glory, and the voice of God speaks to all who have gathered. This is another unique feature of Matthew's telling – in the Gospels of Luke and Mark this voice is heard only by Jesus. But in Matthew, it is a public proclamation: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (v. 17). In this proclamation, God claims and affirms Jesus' identity and commissions him to carry out his purpose on earth.

### **An opportunity for God to Identify Jesus as His Son**

First and foremost, the baptism of Jesus was a revelation by the Father to Jesus and to all people - who Jesus really was. The baptism enabled the Father to proclaim loud and clear that Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah, the long promised one. In a very real, public, obvious, yet personal and intimate way, God pronounces Jesus as his Son.

God speaks to us in the same way as he reminds us that we too are his loved children. God reminds us that he loves us and cares for us, holds us in his loving arms and will never let us go whatever we go through in life. And this is something important in today's world. People today need to know that they are loved, special, cared for.

### **To Identify With Us**

Secondly, the baptism of Jesus shows how much he identifies with us in this life. That's what the incarnation is all about. Jesus has come among us and identified with us. He has taken on our flesh and our blood, our experience, our joys and our concerns so that he might help us; so that we may know that we are not alone; so that we may know that we are loved. It's true that there was no need for Jesus to be baptized, but he did so to identify with us.

A woman named Corrie ten Boon tells the story of a Dutch Christian family, her family, who were concerned for the Jewish people between World Wars I and II. Her grandfather started a weekly prayer group in Holland for the salvation of the Jews. This weekly prayer meeting continued uninterrupted for years, until 1944 when the ten Boon family were sent to a concentration camp for helping Jews to flee from the Nazi persecution in Holland. Corrie tells about her father, Caspar ten Boon. When the Jews were forced to wear the "Star of David," Casper lined up for one. He wore it because he wanted to identify himself with the people for whom he and his family had been praying for all those years. He was prepared to be so completely identified with the Jews that he was willing to wear a sign of shame and suffer persecution for the sake of the people he loved. He didn't have to wear the Star but chose to.

And Jesus enters this life, in the midst of all its pain and sorrow and cares, and love. The world may not be friendly at times; indeed, it can be harsh. Jesus doesn't cause the pandemics or the political unrest or fires or floods, but he stands in the murky waters bringing hope in darkness, he weeps our tears, he cares.

### **A Moment of Decision**

Thirdly, the baptism of Jesus was a moment of decision for him. It was a turning point. For around 30 years Jesus had stayed in Nazareth. He had faithfully carried out his work at the carpenter's bench. He had carried out his duties at home. As he grew up, he was just waiting for a sign – a sign that told him that now was the time for him to take up the next stage in his ministry and embark on a journey that would inevitably lead to the cross. The coming of John

was just what Jesus was waiting for. Jesus saw this as the moment when he had to set out on his task, to begin his preaching, teaching and healing ministry. Jesus, in being baptized made it clear that he was committed to the task and was prepared for all that was to come. It marked a turning point. Jesus, in the act of baptism made a decision. And for each of us there come times in our lives when we have to make decisions – decisions concerning our selves, our Christian commitment and our service for God. But he doesn't leave us alone. He doesn't call us into service and then expect us to rely solely on our own strength. We are empowered by the Spirit.

### **Empowered by the Spirit**

That brings us to the fourth reason for the baptism of Jesus. It was the time when he was equipped and empowered for the task that was coming through the receiving of the Holy Spirit. We are told in Mark's gospel that as Jesus came up out of the water of the River Jordan not only was there a voice saying that he was God's beloved Son, but also heaven was torn open and the Spirit came down like a dove. Jesus, in that act of baptism, was equipped for the task to which he had been called and for which he came to earth.

And God offers us that same equipping and empowerment as we seek to do his will in the world. Sometimes we may feel inadequate or useless to God. Actually, in a sense we are right because we run into serious problems when we think that we are good enough for God, or that we can actually do everything for him in our own strength. But we are just as wrong to assume that, because of our limitations, God won't, or can't use us. Whoever we are, however partial our knowledge or understanding or ability, God can use us. And he uses us effectively because he offers us his strength and power through his Spirit.

And the same is true for churches as it is for individuals. We can often feel overwhelmed and overawed by the world around us, by the amount of need there is here and outside our walls. We don't know where to start or how to get involved. We feel a little afraid sometimes to tackle some of the things we are called to – afraid of getting involved in service or outreach. And though we may feel inadequate, God will equip us by his Spirit for the task he has called us to as individuals and as the church. God sends us his Spirit to fill us, equip us and empower us for his work. And that's the other part of the Covenant promise – God's continued promise to always be with us.

Let us not forget that God claims us as his beloved children.

Let us not forget that this congregation claims you as one of it's beloved children.

Through baptism, we are connected in a tangible way to Christ and reminded of the grace and love extended to us by God. In a few minutes we will have the opportunity to renew our Baptismal Covenant. We believe that the Holy Spirit binds us in covenant to God in this sacrament, which is a symbol of inclusion in the church universal. As we begin a new year together, God's redeeming grace is offered to all people . There are numerous other explanations for what happens in Baptism, but for today, I encourage you to hold in your mind that Baptism is a sacrament that reminds us that God promises us new life. It is a promise as old as God, but in Baptism we proclaim it for all the world to see. It is not something we have earned. It is because God created us to be in relationship, going so far as to send Jesus to make

sure we knew just how much God loves us. Above all else, we have to remember that we are Children of God.

At the turning of the calendar year, we may feel compelled to make those new year's resolutions, and there is nothing wrong with that. If a resolution to quit smoking sticks, praise God and pass the chewing gum. But God's promises carry more weight than our own. God's promises are trustworthy and true and never – ever – broken.

Thanks be to God!

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, this is God's promise and God's proclamation. Through Christ, we belong to God. As Adam Hamilton said in our study of the Incarnation, "I don't know your politics, but I know your God." However you interpret the events that took place this week in our nation's capitol, and wherever you place the blame, in the words of our Bishop Robert Hoshibata, "God asks us to make our communities, our nation and our world, places where peace is proclaimed." The Bishop goes on to say, "I call upon you to join me in prayer for our democracy. I call upon you to pray for peace, for reconciliation, and for hope. As faithful united Methodists, we have a responsibility to share the good news that through Christ, we have the assurance that God is always with us."

Let us join in this prayer that the Bishop has offered.

Eternal God, our Creator, we give heartfelt thanks for the world in which you have placed us. We turn to you as we watch our nation wrought by deep divide over the process of election that draws to a close. Endow our nation with a spirit of reconciliation and peace, that we might emerge from these difficult, contentious moments, into a spirit of light and love made known to us in your son, Jesus Christ.

We ask you to visit us with patience, to quiet our souls. Deliver us from the threatening violence in our streets, wipe away the malice of suspicion of others in our hearts, keep our eyes focused on the vision you give us of the Kin-dom where lion and lamb live together.

As Bishop Ruben P. Job has encouraged us to do no harm, to do good, and to stay in love with you, may we also determine every day that our lives will always be invested in the effort to bring healing instead of hurt; wholeness instead of division; and harmony with the ways of Jesus rather than with the ways of the world.

As we proclaim our faith in you and our love for Christ, let your Spirit reside in our hearts and grant us peace for this time, we pray, in the name of our Shepherd, Jesus, AMEN.

Through Christ, we belong to God. It is a promise sealed in the waters of Baptism, and God will continue to repeat it to us as many times as it takes for us to believe it. It is especially appropriate for us to renew our baptismal covenant this morning.

Let this time be a reminder of God's incredible love and grace for you. If you have been baptized, may it be for you a renewal of that moment and an affirmation of God's promise to you. If you have not been baptized, you are still welcome to enter into God's grace through these words, though this is not a substitute for Baptism. I invite you to contact me so we can

talk more about how you can receive the sacrament of baptism and we can proclaim what God has already done and officially welcome you into the family of faith.

**This is a New Service of Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant that begins on page 50 of the UMH. *The Text in bold print may be said by all. Please stand in body and/or spirit.***

Sisters and brothers in Christ:  
through the sacrament of baptism  
God's Spirit has been poured out upon water,  
water poured over and immersing us,  
water that flows freely for all who will receive it,  
water from the streams of God's saving power and justice,  
water that brings hope to all who thirst for righteousness,  
water that refreshes life, nurtures growth, and offers new birth.  
Today we come to the waters,  
to renew our commitments  
in each other's presence  
to Christ who has raised us,  
the Spirit who has birthed us,  
and the Creator who is making all things new.

**Renunciation of Sin and Profession of Faith**

And so I ask you, will you turn away from the powers of sin and death?

**We renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, Reject the evil powers of this world,  
and repent of our sin!**

Will you let the Spirit use you as prophets to the powers that be?

**We accept the freedom and power God gives us**

**To resist evil, injustice, and oppression**

**In whatever forms they present themselves!**

Will you proclaim the good news and live as disciples of Jesus Christ, his body on earth?

**We confess Jesus Christ as our Savior, put our whole trust in his grace, and promise  
to serve him as our Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened to  
people of all ages, nations, and races!**

Will you be living witnesses to the gospel, individually and together, wherever you are, and in all that you do?

**We will remain faithful members of Christ's holy church and serve as Christ's  
representatives in the world.**

Will you receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments?

**We affirm and teach the faith of the whole church as we put our trust in God, the  
Father Almighty in Jesus Christ, his only Son and in the Holy Spirit, one God now and  
forever.**

**Thanksgiving Over the Water**

The Spirit of the Lord is with us.

**Even so, come Lord Jesus!**

Let us pray.

Almighty God, the life you birthed in us by baptism into Jesus Christ will never die.  
Your justice never fails. Your mercy is everlasting.

**Your healing river flows. Your Spirit blows where you will. We cannot stop you, God!**

But sometimes we try. We try to block the flow, we redirect the winds of the Spirit, or we walk so far away from the life-giving Stream that we do not hear its sound, and we forget its power. We parch ourselves.

**We are dry and thirsty, O God. Come, refresh us!**

Come upon us, Holy Spirit!

**Come upon us, Holy Spirit!**

Come upon these waters.

**Come upon these waters.**

Let these waters be to us drops of your mercy.

**Let these waters remind us of your righteousness and justice.**

Let these waters renew in us the resurrection power of Jesus.

**Let these waters make us long for your coming reign.**

Most Holy God, Abba, Father!

**Glory to you!**

Jesus Christ, Savior, Lord!

**Glory to you!**

Spirit of fire, Spirit over the waters, Spirit of holiness!

**Glory to you!**

Eternal God, One in Three and Three in One!

**All glory is yours, now and forever. Amen!**

May the sound and image of this water be a sign of refreshing, a sign of new life in Christ.  
For those who are baptized, remember that you are baptized, and rejoice!