

Title: Well Done – Franklin, Tennessee
Text: Matthew 3:13-17
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Date: January 11, 2026

Good morning, church, and happy New Year. I want to start small. Not with headlines or breaking news or anything that keeps us up past bedtime. Just a boy, a church van, and an unexpected whisper.

Years ago, when I was a youth, I boarded a church van and headed to Montreat, North Carolina. Picture a van packed with teenagers and snack wrappers, with an aroma equal parts Doritos, dirty socks, and adventure. We hiked trails and rock hopped, sang songs in Anderson Hall, performed a skit louder than talent should allow, and lingered by campfires in the back yard fire pit that glowed long after the last marshmallow was cooked and s'more eaten.

Each morning began with breakfast and a devotion. One morning, someone tossed me the devotional book and said, *"You lead."* I froze. My voice stumbled forward like a kid learning to ride a bike, unsteady, wobbly, dangerously close to tipping over. But right there—right in the awkwardness—something inside nudged: *"Maybe God is speaking through you anyway."*

That night, under a sky crowded with stars you never see back home, I felt a love I couldn't explain and couldn't possibly deserve. A deep love that was not earned and certainly not awarded. I felt a deep sense of peace and love that was just given: fully, freely, and with no strings attached.

A week later, I was baptized, but not in the beautiful soaring architecture of the sanctuary with a barrel ceiling and organ music. Because of church renovations, we were in the Session House of my church in New Bern. Just water. Just prayer. Just a congregation leaning close enough to whisper: *"You are loved. You are God's beloved child!"*

I didn't know it then, but that whisper would grow into a call, a conviction, and a compass.

Fast-forward to now. These past couple of weeks, the world hasn't whispered. Our world, foreign and domestic, has shouted. News cycles are spinning like tornadoes. Stories of violence abroad and at home. Divisions and anger seem to seep into every room, classroom, family gathering, and social media feed.

Some days it feels like the world is a size too big and two shades too dark. Shocking headlines are in the news. Anxious conversations are present. And somewhere beneath it all, the quiet question that catches us off guard: *"Where is God in all of this? And who am I in the middle of it?"*

Which makes today—the Baptism of the Lord Sunday—land differently. Not as a pleasant tradition on some liturgical calendar, but as a lifeline in our lives.

Recall where we are in Matthew's story of Jesus. Jesus leaves Galilee and steps toward the wilderness. No headlines. No fanfare. Just dusty feet and a long walk to a river.

John is waist-deep in the Jordan, preaching repentance. He offers those gathered a chance to turn around and to begin again. A wide variety of people, a mixed lot, are lined up on the muddy banks: tax collectors, laborers, widows, teenagers, soldiers, and doubters. Ordinary people, but desperate for John's message of mercy and purpose. They were desperate for hope. And then Jesus steps into the water.

John is flustered. This isn't how the story is supposed to go. "I need to be baptized by you," he says.

But Jesus keeps walking.

Not because he needs cleansing. Not because he needs approval, but because he intends to stand with us where we stand.

He goes under the muddy water, and in his action, he is identifying with every human ache and every headline that makes us tremble. When he rises, the heavens tear open. The Spirit descends like a dove, and the voice says loud enough to shake creation: *"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*

Let's pause for a moment and let that sink into our minds and travel the long road between our head and heart. Before miracles. Before sermons. Before the cross or the empty tomb. Jesus begins a new movement, and notice Jesus' mission begins not with power, but with belovedness.

Jesus is called "Beloved." His belovedness is not the reward. Rather, his Abba offers him his identity. The surprise is this for me, and maybe for you too. God is pleased before Jesus does anything.

And here's the turn and the one we don't expect: What God says to Jesus, God says to you and me. That's what we need to hear most. Not someday. Not when life gets calmer. Not when we get our act together. Not when our performance catches up to our promises.

Right now, even with the headlines where the world feels brittle: Friends, YOU ARE MY BELOVED. WITH YOU, I AM WELL PLEASED.

That is the heartbeat of baptism. The water on our forehead—or the water you imagine if you can't remember it—tells the truth that the world keeps trying to drown out: You belong first to love, not fear. You belong first to God, not chaos. Your life is rooted in Grace, not news cycles.

Today, we witness that truth again through the installation of ruling elders: Judi, Rick, Rich, Tony, and Rachael.

Their vows? Their acceptance of their call is not a graduation certificate. They step forward with river steps. They are not assuming stage lights. They are stepping into muddy water, shoulder to shoulder with the congregation and with their Savior they love.

They promise—imperfectly, honestly—to follow Jesus through whatever wilderness the future brings. And over them and over all of us today, heaven whispers: **Beloved first. Faithful next.**

But we need to remember something important. We need to claim this truth. Our baptism doesn't stay in a sanctuary. The Jordan River spills everywhere. Into:

- a Meals on Wheels route,
- a school hallway where a child carries more burdens than a backpack,
- the office where everyone is tired and short-tempered and worried about bottom lines and deadlines,
- the home where grief is a quiet roommate,
- the living room where someone doom-scrolls on their phone because fear is easier than hope.

Every place love shows up, no matter how small, the Jordan River is flowing. And you, beloved, baptized you, carry that water with you. Every kindness we offer, every hand we extend, every prayer whispered for the world's pain, every act of mercy that refuses to give up on humanity is God's love dripping into a thirsty world.

So church, in a world that feels unstable, remember the one thing that *is* stable: not our achievements, not our plans, not our opinions, and not our control. But this: **God loves you. God claims you. God calls you Beloved.**

So, take a holy breath and hold it. Let that RUAH, God's Holy Spirit, fill you with what the news can't give and can't steal:

- Belovedness.
- Identity.
- Courage.
- Hope.

Step into this aching world. Step out not to earn God's affection, but to live out the affection already given.

And listen one more time for the voice that still thunders over water and whispers in the night: "You are my beloved. You are my child. And with you, I am well pleased." Amen.