



Baptized for Life  
Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; January 11, 2026  
Baptism of the Lord  
Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17

Our reading from Isaiah speaks of God's servant, God's chosen one. The prophet reminds us that this is the God who created the heavens and stretched them out, who calls in righteousness, who gives a servant as "a covenant to the people, a light to the nations." This is the One who opens blind eyes, frees prisoners from darkness, and declares that former things have passed away and new things are beginning. Isaiah gives us a picture of a God whose very word brings truth into being. And that same divine voice is heard again at the Jordan, when Jesus rises from the waters of baptism.

In the Gospel of Matthew, this is the first we see of the grownup Jesus. Until now, it seems that Jesus has had little say-so in his own life's direction. He's been *wrapped* in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger. He's been hurried off to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod. And he's been

*brought back* to Nazareth where he lives out most of his formative years. But now he steps out of that quiet life and walks toward the muddy Jordan River—choosing—of all things—baptism.

Baptism is a much-debated doctrine of the Christian Church. From whether the method is to be immersion or sprinkling, to whether it is to be an infant or an adult believer who receives baptism—these questions have caused the spilling of an ocean of ink. It reminds me of a story about the son of the Baptist minister who had a hankering to do something new. One day he decided to baptize the three family cats. Now the first two cats didn't put up too much of a fight—they squirmed a bit—but for the most part they were cooperative. But the third cat—well he had ideas of his own. He wanted nothing to do with this child's shenanigans. So, when the boy held the cat over the tub, the cat scratched and clawed until he ripped himself out of the boy's grasp. In the end, the cat escaped with a mere splash of water on his fur. And as the cat was racing away, the boy shouted after him, "Fine, go ahead and be a Presbyterian if that's what you want."

The Directory for Worship in the PC(USA) offers rich guidance on baptism. Allow me to lift up just a few essentials. Baptism is the sign and seal of our incorporation into Christ. It is the bond that unites us to Christ and to one another; because there is one body, there is one baptism. We are baptized only once—not because our faith never falters, but because God's faithfulness never does. And because God's covenant love embraces believers and their children, both adults and children may be baptized. Some imagine baptism as a spiritual finish line, a sign that they have "arrived." In truth, baptism is not the end of a journey but the beginning.<sup>1</sup> It marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, too.

John the Baptist has been busy. Dressed in camel's hair, with a leather belt and a diet of locusts and wild honey, he causes a commotion—and people respond. They come from Jerusalem, they listen, they repent. To the Pharisees and Sadducees, so sure of themselves, John does not mince words: "You brood of vipers!" He tells everyone, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy even to carry his sandals." And then, as if on cue, Jesus arrives and asks to be baptized. Even John is taken aback by the irony. Why should the sinless one seek a baptism of repentance? Yet Jesus insists, saying it is "to fulfill all righteousness." In this moment, Jesus shows us how he will do his Father's work—repeatedly choosing to align himself with God's righteous will—come what may. Also, Jesus sets the stage for how he will be doing God's business *on our behalf*. From now on, every day and every way—Jesus will take his place BESIDE us. In his baptism, Jesus *identifies* with us—broken, sinful creatures that we are. Still Jesus stands with us, and in standing with us, he takes the first step on the road that will lead to Calvary.

For Jesus, baptism is an *act of faithfulness* to God's will *and* an act of solidarity with all humankind. But what does it mean for us? In baptism, we share in Jesus' death and resurrection, dying to whatever separates us from God and being raised to new life. Baptism calls us to repentance. In

*The Gates of Repentance*, the Hebrew prayer book, repentance is described in relation to “turning.” In the fall, leaves easily turn color; birds turn south; and animals turn to storing up food for winter. All this *turning* comes instinctively, and I quote:

But for us, turning does not come so easily. It takes an act of will for us to make a turn. It means breaking old habits. It means admitting that we have been wrong, and this is never easy. It means losing face. It means starting all over again. And this is always painful. It means saying I am sorry. It means recognizing that we have the ability to change. These things are terribly hard to do. But unless we turn, we will be trapped forever in yesterday’s ways.

While baptism is a call of repentance, it is also a call of acceptance. At Jesus’ baptism, a voice from heaven declares, “This is my Son, the Beloved.” In our baptism, we affirm that God has claimed us as God’s children and we are adopted into the family of God. We, too, are named and claimed as God’s beloved.

A certain Presbyterian minister had a 10-year-old boy come into her office one day. “I’d like to be baptized,” he said. “We were learning about Jesus’ baptism in Sunday school. And when the teacher asked the kids who had been baptized, everyone but me raised their hands. I want to be baptized too.” Using her best pastoral voice, the pastor asked, “Do you really want to be baptized just because everyone else is?” “Well, no,” said the little boy, “I want to be baptized because it means I belong to God.”<sup>ii</sup> In our baptism, we recognize *who* we are—but more importantly—we recognize *whose* we are!

Through the waters of baptism, we are bound to Christ, standing in the Jordan. Baptism is a call of repentance, a call of acceptance, *and* a call to new life empowered by God’s Spirit. Like Jesus, we have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us—to guide, inspire, and strengthen us—and to equip us to live into our baptism—faithfully, obediently.

In a sense, we are still at the Jordan—alongside Jesus and alongside one another. Some of us step into those waters early in life; some much later; some are still standing on the riverbank, wondering. If you are standing there today—curious, cautious, or hopeful—know that you are not alone. If you would like to talk about baptism, about what it means to step into those waters, I welcome that conversation.

Martin Luther often reminded people that baptism is the beginning of something that takes a lifetime to live out. And when he was besieged by doubt or fear, he would cry, “I am baptized!” In that remembrance he found renewal and strength for the road ahead.<sup>iii</sup> There is power in baptism, and power in remembering it.

When our passion for faithful living fades—let us cry, “I am baptized!”  
When fear becomes our closest companion—let us cry, “I am baptized!”  
When life turns and we feel utterly alone—let us cry, “I am baptized!”

The waters of baptism continually renew and refresh us for abundant life. Like Jesus—our brother and our Savior—may we live as God’s beloved, turning toward God’s righteous will, and walking in the power of the Spirit all our days. And all God’s people said, **“Amen!”**

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<sup>i</sup> Book of Order

<sup>ii</sup> Sarah Jo Sarchet, “Set Up by the Spirit,” preached at 4<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian Church, Chicago, 1/10/99, [www.fourthchurch.org](http://www.fourthchurch.org)

<sup>iii</sup> Lectionary Homiletics, Rochelle Stackhouse, Dec. 2003-Jan 2004, p.51.

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