



## St. Luke's East Hampton

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

January 11, 2026; Epiphany 1A: [Isaiah 42:1-9](#), [Acts 10:34-43](#), [Matthew 3:13-17](#)

Today is the day we celebrate Jesus' baptism. Just as the Eucharist has roots in Jewish traditions of shabbat meals and Seder dinners, baptism has its roots in Jewish purification rituals, particularly a ritual bath known as a Mikveh. In Christian liturgy, we have continued ritual cleansing through things like the symbolic washing of a priest's hands and the congregation saying a confession and sharing of the peace before the Eucharist. Christianity, however, took Baptism to the next level. While a Mikveh could be repeated again and again, the baptism of John the Baptist and Jesus provided cleansing once and for all. For Christians baptism became a sacrament: an outward sign of an inward grace, a physical symbol of something inward and spiritual that was going on. Like the waters of creation, baptism represented a new beginning. Like the crossing of the Red Sea, baptism represented a transition from slavery to freedom. Like the death and resurrection of Jesus, baptism represented the end and the start of a whole new resurrected life.

With the publication of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, baptism has become the de-facto mission statement for the Episcopal Church and the primary source of identity and vocation for the people of God and the Baptismal Covenant has become. Since my baptism, I have had lots of adventures. Much was because of ordination. But ordination was simply building on what was already there. Baptism was the start of it all.

That same was true for Jesus. Jesus wasn't baptized until he was about 30 years old. We don't really know much of what happened those intervening years. There is mention of his being raised in Nazareth and his parents taking him to the temple in Jerusalem as a boy. As he grew up, it is likely that Jesus followed the example of Joseph and became a builder (probably a stonemason rather than a carpenter.) Given his reputation as a glutton and winebibber and his choosing of disciples from the docks, it seems that the young adult Jesus hung out with a rather rough crowd. It is also likely that he spent some time with the Essenes, a monastic community on the shores of the Dead Sea. We don't know everything that happened with Jesus in his early years. We do know that when he was about 30, he was baptized, and that with his baptism everything changed. In his baptism, Jesus learned who he was, who his father was, and that his father loved and was pleased with him. From his baptism, Jesus learned identity and vocation. It is from his baptism that Jesus' ministry began.

Just before Christmas, a chaplain colleague sent me a link to a Facebook Post by the Secretary of War. In it, the Secretary made a public statement that military chaplains had failed and that he would make chaplaincy great again. His message was that the Christians were being persecuted and the military was in a spiritual crisis because chaplains had focused on things

like Spiritual resilience, Spiritual wellness, and various DEI programs, all of which he was ending. The Secretary's directive was that chaplains - and Christians in general - would be unleashed, freed of restraints, requirements, and other regulations. I have to say that, even when received via the cowardice of Social Media, the message that you are a failure, that what you and your team have done is the source of the problem and have actually made things worse is hard to hear. The night after that post, the Episcopal Bishop of the Armed Forces held a zoom with Episcopal Chaplains serving around the globe across all different branches of the service. She told us that we had not failed, that our work was valued and we were doing a good job. She urged us not to give up or quit but to keep going and focus on the people under our care. Since that night, I have given a great deal of thought to the Secretary's words. He's actually correct. We are in a spiritual crisis. Christians - just not the ones that he's thinking about - are being oppressed. Across this country people are being persecuted. People are being shot in our streets; people are being blown up while clinging to wreckage at sea. Through all of it, clergy have been conspicuously silent. How different would the world be if they were unleashed, freed of all constraints, and empowered to respond? How different would the world be if those who claimed to follow Jesus actually followed Jesus? In a few minutes we will promise to renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God, renounce the evil powers of the world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, and renounce greed and other sinful desires that draw us personally from the love of God. (See the Book of Common Prayer BCP, p. 302.) Not long after that, we will promise to seek and serve Christ in all people, loving our neighbor as ourselves, and to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being, (See Book of Common Prayer, p. 305.) Imagine what would happen if we did what we said we would do. If we did that, we would join an army of angels fighting with a light that darkness can never overcome. This may not be the vision proclaimed by the Secretary of War. It is the vision proclaimed by the Prince of Peace. Talk about Christians being unleashed. As Harvard Professor Cornel West said so eloquently this week, we are in a spiritual battle against those who believe that might makes right. The Good News is that we have a countervailing force inside of us, outside of us, and around us. We have the force and power of love. We have the force and power of good. We have the force and power of God. We can and we will prevail.

The proof of that is found in this morning's service of baptism. Baptisms at any age are wonderful. The baptism of an adult is particularly special. Andrea is coming today with her eyes wide open. She is a former marine. She is an ER nurse at NYU's Hospital. She has seen people at their best and she has seen them at their worst. In all of it she knows that God made her and God does not make mistakes. She knows that God is with her, God loves her, is proud of her, and that God has a mission for her to accomplish. She has had a full life. Today is not the end of her journey. It is the beginning of something completely new for her. It is also the new beginning of something new for us.

Today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany. The word Epiphany comes from the Greek word meaning "manifestation" or "showing." Epiphany is a time when our readings show the world who Jesus is, who we are, what we are called to be. We are going through difficult times. We, however, have a countervailing force inside of us, outside of us, and around us, that will enable and empower us to succeed. To tap into that, we, like Jesus, need to go back to our baptisms, reclaim our baptismal identities and baptismal vocations, know that God loves us and is pleased with us, and let our ministries begin again.