

Matthew 3:13-17

13Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. 16And 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. 17And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

"You Are My Beloved"

Matthew 3: 13 - 17
Baptism of the Lord

January 11, 2026
La Habra UMC

by Rev. Dr. Soomee Kim

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Tender Mercies is a movie that came out in 1983. This is one of a few movies dealing with God's mercy in our live. As I was preparing for this message, I watched it again, and made Sam watch with me. He thought it was too slow.

The movie tells the story of Mack Sledge, played by Robert Duvall who was a famous country western singer and songwriter. He may had had better days with his career, but as the film starts, we meet a miserable man. With the bitter sense of failure, that resulted from the unhappy marriage and abuse of alcohol, he wanders off to Texas, and ends up at a gas station adjacent a run-down motel.

The owner of the filling station and the motel is a woman named Rosa Lee played by Tess Harper. She married at 16, mothered a boy at 17, and widowed at 18, when her husband was drafted to Vietnam and died.

So she raised a boy on her own. In the movie the boy who was called Sunny was about 10 years old.

She sings in the choir at the church nearby,
and prays regularly thanking God - for the tender mercies
God has granted in her life.

Mack ends up doing odd jobs for Rosa Lee
with a promise he wouldn't drink while at work.
Eventually a relation develops, and Mack and Rosalie marry.

And finally one day
Mack and Sonny were baptized in a double ceremony at the Baptist church.
They were coming home in the truck
and this conversation takes place.

All three of them are sitting in the front seat of a truck,
Sunny in the middle, and Mack driving.

Sonny : Well, we done it, Mack. We were baptized.
Everybody said I was going to feel like a changed person.
I guess I do feel a little different.
But I don't feel a whole lot different.
Do you?

Mack: Not yet.

Sonny (looks at Mack): You don't look any different.
(Then he looks at himself in the rear-view mirror)
You think I look any different?

Mack: Not yet.

Well.... they may have been baptized in the Baptist church,
(baptismal pool for immersion)
but Mack certainly understood Weslian Methodist theology
of going unto perfection.

You noticed, Mack's answers were "Not Yet!".
But the answer is not "No". It is "Not Yet."
which means it is not yet, but someday we will....

No, we might not radically change right away after the baptism,

but baptism is the beginning of a long journey into perfection.

We call it Sanctification.

Mack did not admit it right away, but things were different for him.

He was a changed person.

For the first time in his life Mack saw what he had, who he was and whose he was.

And it is the role of a church

To continue nurturing and helping the baptized to grow spiritually.

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Baptism acknowledges who we are and whose we are.

In today's scripture, we read Matthew's account of the baptism of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Jesus comes to Jordan river, and wishes to be baptized by John.

John protests,

"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

But Jesus answers,

"Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

To fulfill all righteousness.

Righteousness, according to Walter Brueggemann, the famous theologian, Means "the power to give life".

Righteousness is the power to give life.

In this sense only God can be called righteous, because only God can give life.

The one gift of God is life.

In the baptism of Jesus,

the Life Giver is made manifest.

That is why we study this scripture, on the first Sunday after Epiphany.

Epiphany, which means reveal, appearance, or manifestation, reveals the righteousness of God.

Epiphany makes a great claim,

that God in Christ has shared the power to give life with the Church.

Therefore, to be the Church is to be the life-giving community.

Going back to our movie Tender Mercies,
Mack was able to take a glimpse of the mystery of God's tender mercies
because he has experienced Rosa Lee's tender love and care.

Human love opens Mack's eye to divine love.

As Mack was slowly rebuilding his life,
one day, he hears that his 18 year old daughter
was killed in an automobile accident.
Mack wonders, why he was saved while his daughter was killed.

He speaks to Rosa Lee
"I don't know why I wandered out to this part of Texas, drunk,
and you took me in, and pitied me,
and helped me to straighten out and married me.
Why? Why did that happen? Is there a reason that happened?"

The question remains unanswered,
but Mack, Rosa Lee, and her son Sonny grow together as a family.

In spite of all his past failures,
in spite of the tragic death of his eighteen-year-old daughter,
Mack is able to sing a song.

"God sent his pure sweet love... on the wings of a dove."

The gift of baptism that Mack receives is a sign that he is loved by God.

As did Mack, we can face reality in life,
aware of the mystery of God's tender mercies.
weathering the bad and holding on to the good.

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Water is the basic element used in baptism.
Some tradition does immersion, others sprinkling.
Unlike the Baptist, we claim that the method is not as crucial
as the symbolism of water in baptism.

Water cleans.

Imagine a day without water,
no brushing teeth, no shower, no washing dishes, no laundries....
Our life can be quite filthy and dry.
Likewise, in baptism, all the sins are washed away and forgiven.
A new life starts, with a renewed conviction.

There is also healing power in water.
The step in healing a wound is cleaning it good with water.

We frequently read the directions in the bottles of some strong or dangerous fluid,
in case this substance gets in the eye, flush with clean water,
in case of accidental swallowing, drink lots of water.
Water heals as it cleans.

Water refreshes.

One glass of cold water in the hot summer day
quenches our thirst and revigorates our spirit.

Water gives life.

Plants need water to survive, animals need water to be alive,
and human beings certainly need water to live.

In the dried out desert, water brings forth new life.

It is not a co-incidence to use water in baptism.

In baptism we take our first step
to start a refreshed life with our new identity.
In baptism, we are submitted to the righteousness of God.
In baptism, we declare our membership in the movements of a righteous God.
In baptism, we obey to live out divine demand in our lives.

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Martin Luther,
the father of religious reformation, declared.

"There is no greater comfort to a Christian than baptism."

We are told, that in his own times of despair, depression, and confusion,
this great preacher and theologian
received comfort by touching his forehead
where he had been baptized,
and repeated to himself,

"Martin, be calm.

Baptismatus sum, Baptismatus sum.
(I am baptized, I am baptized.)"

Baptism is an ever present reminder that our salvation,
our nearness to God
is the result of what God has done
not because we are good, but because God is Good
and God is a merciful God.
And we are God's children.

As we celebrate the baptism of our Lord, Jesus on earth,
We renew our baptism today.

And just in case, we have forgotten,
we remind ourselves through the Reaffirmation of Baptism,
We are baptized!

Responses to the Word Spoken:

Father in heaven, at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan you proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit. As His follower, may we also claim our identity as Your Beloved and live out our baptismal vows each moment of our earthly life. Amen.