

Sunday, January 11, 2026
The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ

**Solemn Eucharist and the Renewal of Baptismal
Vows**
11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Matthew Moretz
on
Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17
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The Voice Over the Waters

This Epiphany season we return to Matthew's Gospel, and we find ourselves at the Jordan, that narrow ribbon of water where Scripture so often gathers itself for a decisive moment. (Matthew 3:13-17)

Matthew is not telling a new tale. He is continuing Israel's long story of God's fidelity: the God who calls Abraham (Genesis 12), who hears the cry of slaves (Exodus 3), who makes a way through the sea. (Exodus 14) Not the God of quick fixes, but the God who stays, who keeps drawing a people toward justice, healing, and wholeness.

And now John the Baptist stands in the wilderness and announces, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matthew 3:2) Under occupation, don't think of this as a religious hallmark card, instead as a spark in dry grass. During times that theirs, hope is dangerous.

And the geography matters. The Jordan is not a scenic backdrop. It is boundary and memory. Their ancestors stood here and crossed into promise. (Joshua 3) So the crowd comes carrying centuries of longing, thinking, "This is it. God is finally going to do what God said."

They step into the water ready for the new life on the other side.

Then John adds one volatile ingredient: power. "One who is more powerful than I is coming," he says, one who will baptize "with the Holy Spirit and fire." (Matthew 3:11) Winnowing fork. Chaff. Unquenchable fire.

So What kind of savior does that language summon?

A surface reading would be: A strong one. A decisive one. The kind who sorts the world into winners and losers and makes our enemies regret their life choices.

And that is not only a first-century fantasy. We know it too. We carry our own private wish for a God who will vindicate us, eliminate what threatens us, and prove that we were right all along.

We would be very comfortable with a messiah who shares our grudges.

And then the story turns, not with fire, but with a man simply walking into the scene.

Jesus comes from Galilee to the Jordan to John. (Matthew 3:13) No trumpets. No entourage. No performance. Just Jesus, stepping into the same dust and the same line as everyone else.

He comes as one among many.
And he asks for baptism.

And now the story turns awkward. The one John has been announcing, the one framed in fire and judgment, does not arrive above the water. He steps into it, to be touched, to be led, to go under.

John cannot make this fit. He blurts out the honest protest: “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Matthew 3:14) In other words, “This is not how rescue works. This is not how power behaves.”

And then comes the sentence that gives the kingdom its shape.

Jesus says, “Suffer it to be so now. (Let it be so now); for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness.” (Matthew 3:15)

“Fulfill all righteousness.” In Matthew, righteousness is not moral perfection. It is the world put right. It is justice, faithful relationship, God’s life flowing through human life as healing rather than harm. It is what Isaiah dares to imagine: God’s servant bringing justice not by shouting or crushing, but by steady, gentle truth. (Isaiah 42:1–4)

And here is the shock. God’s justice begins with the Messiah taking the lower place.

The greater submits to the lesser.
The stronger refuses “power over.”
The King steps into the river as if he were simply one more needy human being.

This is what righteousness looks like in the kingdom of heaven: not domination, not spectacle, not control, but the downward movement of love. If you want the apostolic echo of that movement, it is Philippians: Christ “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.” (Philippians 2:7)

And Matthew presses it further. This is not only humility. It is Letting Go.

Jesus says, “Let it be.” John consents.

Baptism here is a revelation of how Jesus moves through the world. Forgiveness is not only something Jesus will later dispense from a safe distance. It begins as something he embodies. He releases the advantage. He refuses the dominant position. He will not be the kind of messiah that feeds our yearning for force.

And John must let go too. John releases his picture of what a savior must be.

This is a hard thing to swallow, but it is a freeing one. Sometimes the first forgiveness is forgiving God for not saving us the way we demanded.

So Jesus goes under the water, and what is coming is no private religious moment, but one that opens up until it fills the whole cosmos.

As Jesus comes up from the Jordan, “the heavens were opened.” The Spirit descends “like a dove.” And a voice says, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:16–17)

You can hear the echoes in the Hebrew Scriptures. “The voice of the LORD is over the waters,” the 29th Psalm says, and suddenly this scene is not just at the Jordan. It is everywhere God has ever spoken life into chaos. (Psalm 29:3)

And deeper still, it takes us back to the top of the Torah scroll. Before there is land, before there is order, before there is anything we would call safe, “the Spirit of God” hovers over the face of the deep, and God speaks. (Genesis 1:2–3)

So the Jordan becomes two things at once. It is a river, yes, but it is also the deep.

It is death, because going under the water is surrender. It is the end of the old way of gripping, the old way of proving, the old way of living by control.

And it is birth, because coming up is creation again. The world begins again in a dripping, ordinary human body. Paul will later dare to say what Matthew is showing: in baptism we are buried with Christ and raised with him. (Romans 6:3–4)

And notice this, because it is the sharp edge of comfort. The voice does not wait for Jesus to achieve something. It does not wait for a victory or a miracle or a display of strength. It speaks Love at the moment of vulnerability, at the moment of choosing the lower place.

And then there is another ancient echo: the dove.

The dove takes us back to Noah, to the flood, to the long waiting while the world is uninhabitable, to the fragile hope that there might be land again. (Genesis 8:8–12)

Now the dove rests on Jesus, and the message is not “the storm was never real.” The message is: the storm does not get the last word. God is with you in the deep waters, and God is with you when you climb out of them.

God does not meet you only when you are dry and impressive. God meets you in the deep.

But if we stop there, baptism becomes a lovely picture and nothing more

Because what is revealed in the water is not a sentimental picture. It is a sort of rule of life. Release and forgiveness. Virtues that are costly. They sting. They take time. They feel, very often, like losing.

And Matthew proves it immediately. “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted.” (Matthew 4:1) Notice, not as a detour. As the next step.

And what are the temptations? They are invitations to become the kind of messiah everyone expects.

If you are the Son of God, turn stones into bread. Make power solve hunger on demand. (Matthew 4:3)

If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. Make God perform. Make faith spectacular. (Matthew 4:6)

If you are the Son of God, take the kingdoms. Grasp authority. Fix the world from the top. (Matthew 4:8–9)

They are not temptations toward obvious evil. They are temptations toward useful control.

And three times Jesus refuses. Not because hunger is trivial, not because suffering is acceptable, but because the kingdom cannot be built on coercion, even benevolent coercion. The moment you seize power to do good, you discover you must keep seizing it, and soon you are protecting the power more than you are serving the good.

So Jesus will not found the kingdom on domination, not even domination with good intentions. He will found it on a different strength, the strength to release, the strength to refuse the shortcut, the strength to love without needing to control.

So what now, for us, here, today?

Perhaps the question is not, “Do I believe this happened?” but, “Where am I standing in the story?”

Where have I decided that holiness must look like mastery, that goodness must look like being in charge?

Where have I asked God to come as a strongman, because a strongman would relieve me of the humiliating work of release?

And where, just now, am I using power as a substitute for truth. The power of the cutting remark, the power of silence, the power of always needing the last word, the power of being unanswerable.

The invitation of the Jordan is not to become harmless. It is to become free. Free enough to take the lower place without collapsing, free enough to let go without panic, free enough to act without the need to dominate. That is the strength of Christ.

Let me end where our reading ends, with water and a voice.

Christ the Messiah gets in line. Christ queues!

The Messiah goes under the water.

The Messiah rises, and heaven opens.

And God’s voice does not say, “This is my Son, the one who crushes the enemy.”

It says, “This is my Son, the Beloved.” (Matthew 3:17)

Which means one of the first public revelations of who Jesus is, is not a display of force, but the choice to stand with us and beneath us. This is Christian power: power that does not need to dominate in order to heal.

So when you leave here, do not ask first, “How do I win?” Ask, “How do I stay truthful? How do I release my grip? Where can I take the lower place without losing love, without losing courage, without losing my humanity?”

Because the heavens open over that kind of life. And as you renew your vows today, know that a voice will be above you saying, “This is my child, my beloved.”

Amen.