



Sermon for the Baptism of Our Lord, Jan. 12, 2025



St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene
The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Isaiah 43:1-7](#)

[Psalm 29](#)

[Acts 8:14-17](#)

[Luke 3:15-17, 21-22](#)

Lord of all time and eternity, you opened the heavens and showed yourself as Father in the baptism of Jesus your beloved Son as he was immersed in the swirling waters of this world. In the midst of the swirling river of life, we ask you, too, to call us by name and through your Spirit's power complete our rebirth through the cleansing waters of the new creation. We pray this through Jesus Christ, our Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.

Welcome, friends. This has been a hard week in our nation. For all who have lost their homes, schools, churches, and businesses in the Los Angeles fires, we pray – Lord have mercy. God, help us to reach out and provide in whatever way we can, in these long days ahead.

Many of us know people in the Los Angeles area who have been directly affected. Even those who did not lose their homes have lost communities of people and are facing the chaos of deep disruption and raw need that these firestorms have left in their wake.

Please pray. Pray for them all.

Please reach out to anyone you know who has been affected. Let them know your care and concern. And listen. If you can, pray with them.

Please give in whatever way you can to help people. Our Friday news has links for where you can make financial donations. There will also be other ways to give and to help, as we learn more about next steps.

Friends, thank you for the joy we shared through the season of Christmas, in singing and hearing the full stories of Jesus' birth and childhood.

Today, we join Jesus now as an adult. We join him at the launching point of his public ministry. Emmanuel, God-with-us, is on the road. And his public ministry begins with his baptism.

Here we find him among the crowd that has gathered around his cousin John the Baptizer.

He senses and feels the same heightened expectation of all the people around him.

He descends into the same river, the same waters, as everyone else.

And he is named, claimed, embraced by God, directly

In the next weeks of this season of Epiphany, we see how Jesus shares the light and love of God. We see how light dawns through Jesus.

It doesn't all happen at once. And, it seems to take some time to get going.

First, he turns water into wine at a wedding feast.

Then, he begins to teach in synagogues around the region and healing people. He makes his bold declaration of purpose from the words of the prophet Isaiah.

Then, he tells some hard truths to people gathered, and speaks of God favoring those we might consider foreigners, outsiders, and undeserving.

Then, he chooses and calls followers to help him and to learn from him.

And he heals people and paints a picture of the kingdom of God that turns around all our ideas of who is blessed and how we are to live.

Jesus' impact and ministry grows, expands, and reaches deeply into the world around him.

But it doesn't start off that way.

It seems like maybe it took a little while for things to get going – and for Jesus to get going. John records his first miraculous act at a wedding feast, and in this moment Jesus seems reticent to step forward and act – he is waiting for what feels like “the right time.” It's his mother, Mary, who nudges him into action and even pulls a classic maneuver on him when he initially resists her nudging – “Do whatever he tells you.” It is after this nudging moment that Jesus begins his ministry in full. And at first he starts off in familiar places – synagogues, where he could step into a familiar role to himself and everyone else, as a teacher. But then, there is this moment where he chooses and reads a scripture aloud for everyone that becomes his declaration of purpose. We all know it, and you know I've said this is the heart of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And this moment becomes a pivotal moment in his ministry – he names a truth he recognizes, that God's favor and love stretches out beyond the synagogues to the wide surrounding communities and scattered people, beyond those who know themselves as chosen to the whole wide world.

Jesus doesn't just step out of the water after baptism and start teaching, preaching, and healing. In the midst of this crowd of people with whom Jesus is baptized, Jesus has this profound and intimate experience of God. Jesus hears God claim and adore him, Jesus senses God's Spirit embracing and gripping him.

But he does not suddenly shine with the brightness of God's glory. He does not calm the muddy swirling waters of the Jordan. He does not begin speaking or healing.

This claiming of God has to sit with him, sink fully into him. And, as he begins to step forward, like any of us, he starts smaller, he ponders and observes and takes stock of the world around him, he tests the waters. Soon, he takes things deeper and stretches wider – he takes new turns.

His identity – who he has recognized himself to be and who God has named and embraced him to be – sinks in, more and more deeply in how he engages the world around him.

And, the very first thing Jesus did after his baptism was to go into the wilderness – to get away from the noise and distraction of public life, so he could pray, meditate, and face the temptations that come with

being favored and claimed by God. Jesus had to face down the temptations of getting too enamored with his own self-importance. "I am God's beloved. And I am not here for me. I am here to give myself away."

This time in the wilderness, this time of facing down the devil, was absolutely essential. It took this profound moment of baptism and let it sink fully and deeply through Jesus' whole being.

When God names us and claims us, it can be tempting to rush forward in our amazement and joyful gratitude and excitement. We want to jump into action. But, when God names us and claims us, we really do better to take time and intentional space to let this experience sink in, to let it touch all parts of us, to grapple with the question, "What does this mean?"

And, let's be clear. This claiming and embracing of God doesn't happen in a vacuum. It happens in the midst of the swirl of our lives – and so, all the swirl of our lives comes into conversation with God's embrace of us. This claiming and embracing of Jesus by God didn't happen for Jesus in a vacuum – it happened in the midst of a crowd of people who were also baptized, and it happened as Jesus is immersed in that muddy swirling river where everyone else had been immersed and was being immersed.

You've probably seen images of people in India gathered around the River Ganges and then wading into the river. It is not exactly a clean river! But it is considered holy and treated as holy. The Jordan River is not exactly clean, either, these days – in 2010 it was declared unsafe for baptisms! In Jesus' day, it was like other bodies of water, receiving runoff from cleaning and sewage in populated areas – quite clean at the headwaters but getting muddied and dirtied along its way. And yet, it was and is considered holy. It was a place where people, gathering around John the Baptist, sought God's presence, healing, anchoring, and guiding touch in their lives. It is in these kinds of swirling, murky waters, surrounded by all sorts of us people, where Jesus is submerged - buried! - that God calls to him, claims him, declares his love for him, and touches him powerfully.

Think about this. Jesus wades into and is submerged into waters that touched all these other people, that had passed along riverfronts by cities and towns and farms where people had washed and cleaned. Jesus wades into waters where others have been baptized and have sought to shed the messiness, the wounds, the weaknesses, the wrongdoings of their lives. Physically and spiritually, the waters carry all of this. The waters themselves are carrying the prayers and yearnings of all these people, their cries to God, "Let there be light. Let light come and dawn in me. I am in darkness, darkness is all around, I am lost in the chaos, I have lost my way in following down paths that have promised light but have given only more darkness. My mind is clouded, my heart is lured away, what I am doing now or thinking now or wanting or wishing now is no longer in the light. Oh, God, let there be light!"

And Jesus is touched and surrounded by and immersed in all of these cries of human hearts. He is not just touched by the Spirit of God. He is touched by all of human nature and all of creation in these waters.

In this baptism, Jesus lets himself be claimed by all of humanity and creation that he loves. He carries this, as well as his being claimed by God, into his time of deep prayer in the wilderness – and for all the time beyond in his ministry among us – and for all of eternity. Jesus is marked, by us and by God. How will he sort it out in his life from this moment forward? What does this mean, and how then shall he live?

Friends, each of us is a child of God. Each one of us has been named and claimed by God. You are here, and God has called you by name. You are here – and you are in all the places you have been in the river of

your life – and humanity and creation all around you has touched you and submerged you in itself. And also, God has touched and embraced you.

Have you taken time and space, to ponder and consider “What does this mean? How now shall I live?”

Have you faced your own temptations of self-importance, or of self-unimportance?

Have you let the humanity around you cling to you, have you acknowledged and examined what joys and pains and sorrows, what yearnings and woundings and wrongdoings and right-doings, have touched and shaped you in the river of your own life?

Have you let God’s naming and claiming of you sink in? Have you sat in God’s embrace?

We begin to respond to this new life in God’s favor and delight, in small and sometimes hesitant steps. We begin to gain courage and let this new identity take root in all parts of us. We step out beyond our familiar spaces to interact with new people, in new ways. We become surer, clearer, more direct, more artful, in how we offer the gifts God has given us to offer and in how we bring the message of God’s truth and love to the world around us. Wherever we are on this journey of responding to God’s claiming and calling, we may need nudges. We may need to prompt ourselves. We may need to just take that next unfamiliar step.

But first, we spend some time alone with God, letting it all sink in: “I am God’s – I am God’s child, deeply loved – with all that I am, and with all that has touched and claimed and immersed me in this swirling river, I am washed clean, and I am touched and embraced by God. How then shall I live?” Jesus keeps taking this time to return to quiet places where he can revisit these thoughts and ponderings in prayer. We need this kind of time, at least just as much as Jesus.

Take time, friends. Let yourself meditate, pray, and face yourself. Let yourself face the reality of all that has touched you. Let yourself face the truth of God’s embracing love for you as God’s child. And then see where your next steps lead you. No matter what your age or place in life, you will find yourself nudged, invited, and prompted from within to follow God’s call to act, speak, and live in this world with powerful purpose.

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.” “I delight in you. Be who you are, my beloved. Be fully who you are and who I made you to be.”

Let there be light. You, a new creation – we, a new creation together – comes to life and grows.