



First Sunday in the Season of Epiphany The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ



Sermon, the Rev. Dr. David T. Gortner, Jan. 11, 2026

[Isaiah 42:1-9](#)

[Psalm 29](#)

[Acts 10:34-43](#)

[Matthew 3:13-17](#)

Good morning, and a happy January to you all!

The holidays really wrapped up for us at our house this week, as our oldest returned just yesterday to college for her final semester.

But ongoing joy and celebration has marked part of this week, as Christians around the world celebrated Epiphany – and marked the birth of Jesus. There were huge celebrations in Ethiopia, with tens of thousands of Coptic Orthodox Christians gathered in Addas Ababa for song and celebration. There were celebrations across the Middle East among Christians – and among Eastern Orthodox Christians everywhere – celebrating Christ’s birth and the visitation of the Magi.

Thank God for the gift of joy still being celebrated and sung and shared. Because, it certainly is not all joy out there in the world in this new year. We continue to see the face of war and aggression in nation against nation – and our own country stepping into that space of war and aggression. We continue to see bluster across the globe for one nation claiming another as its own territory and threatening or enacting violence. We continue to see violence and death in our streets. We continue to be barraged by bad news amplified, and misguided by twisted misinformation now amplified and mobilized with the lightning speed potentials of A.I. Protests continue, and assaults against protesters continue, here and around the globe.

In a world such as this, for just such a time as this, and for the sake of our own souls, we start afresh today.

Today we begin the journey with Christ Jesus in his adult years of public ministry.

What a great way to start the New Year, together, as followers of Christ.

This week, we begin again. We go into the waters with Christ and renew our hearing of God’s full embrace of us.

Next week, we join with Christians around the world praying for the unity of the Church and the healing of our divisions.

And then, the following week, we pray for the whole world and its many different nations, and for the faithful work of the Church in all places around the world.

We then come to the Feast of the Presentation, known as Candlemas and kind of a “Little Christmas,” when we remember Jesus being brought to the Temple as a babe – and we celebrate Christ who is the Light of the world.

All of this then prepares the way for us to have our congregation’s annual meeting, and to set our minds and hearts to where God is calling us to be and serve this year, individually and together.

We start this year with a journey of listening for God's call and living into that call. And we begin the journey at the river's edge, at the waters of baptism. We begin with remembering the promptings of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and with hearing God call us by name, claim us as beloved, and open for us a vision of our lives in this world.

Jesus comes to the waters.

Jesus meets and connects with his cousin – meets the man who has already been drawing people from all over with what he is proclaiming and teaching and with the washing for a cleansing of old ways and a turning to a fresh beginning – meets his relative who has a reputation for how he dresses and what he eats and how he speaks. Consider this, that John dressed in camel skin and hair... the skin and hair of an animal regarded as at least partially unclean in Hebrew law.

Jesus steps into the oozy mud along the riverbank – the Jordan River is less like the Spokane River or Snake River, but more like the Red River in Texas or the Delaware River downstream in Pennsylvania and Maryland, or the Ganges River in India – muddy, carrying all that has flowed into it from upstream.

Jesus walks with John into the mud-brown water of this river.

And Jesus goes down into the water – something he had surely done before whenever he had taken a bath – but he goes down into this mud-colored water – and when he rises up, something new and profound opens up for him. It is as if heaven itself opens. And a dove – a pretty kind of pigeon – flies above him. And a voice comes to him – and names him and claims him. “You are my beloved Son, my Child dear to my heart, and I delight in you.”

Epiphany – a word that essentially means “Aha!”, it means appearance or manifestation. It's a fancy words for when we discover something or recognize something for the first time, when the light dawns for us in a really big way. It's a word that says God is showing himself to us.

An Epiphany is a moment that leads us to a kind of change. We hear the words to a song in a new way that touches our deepest sense of who we are and whose we are. We get a call or card from someone that says something we've heard before but never REALLY heard before. We see a sunrise or sunset or a tree or rock that calls out to us. We dream something that shakes something loose in us. The vehicles for our epiphanies are sometimes more spectacular, but often quite mundane. But something in us is ready to receive and perceive things in a new way.

And then suddenly, we are more than we were. The world has colors we had not seen or named before. Something deep has shifted in us that we did not expect. What we say in such moments is “Aha!” and “Oh!” and “Thank you.”

When we experience such moments, we are suddenly aware of the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in the world. And we are changed – we are converted – by those experiences.

Friends, I want you today, right now, to think about and remember those moments in your lives that have been epiphanies, that have been little baptisms, immersions in the flow of God's life-giving presence.

What were those moments? Where were you? Who were you with? What were you doing – or not doing? What was there? What did it smell like, sound like, look like?

And, what did you hear at the heart of this experience? How was God speaking to you? What opened up for you? What changed?

To help you return to those important, life-changing moments in your life, take a moment with me and follow Jesus into the water. Put yourself in the scene. Jesus approaches John at the Jordan River's edge. Step into the water – the muddy water, surrounded by trees and farm fields. There are people all around, some coming out of the water, some ready to come in. Feel John's hands pressing Jesus into the water, then holding him as he went under the water. Feel the water flow overhead and surround, shutting out the sound from land and sky. Water on all parts of the body, everywhere. Feel John's hands and arms lifting, and the press of Jesus' feet on the muddy river floor, and Jesus resurfacing to sun and sky. Sense the Spirit's descent, and the voice surrounding Jesus.

Now, return to your own life, across your years. Where are the tangible places you have sensed God's presence and the powers of earth and the care of people completely surrounding you? Was it on the job? In school? On a special trip or journey? With a teacher? On a battlefield? During an illness? At a major family event like a marriage or birth or funeral? Among friends? What happened? Did you share the experience with anyone? How did it change you? What picture can you paint, what story can you share?

These experiences are ways of being immersed in God's presence, and being claimed by God.

Everybody, please take the Bibles out in your pews. Turn to Revelation 2 and find verse 17. Let's read that passage together.

Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.

You are named by God in a way no other person or place has named you. You are treasured!

So, I have a second question for you. In life-changing moments such as this, where were you in your own heart and mind? What was preparing you and opening you up to experience God in this way?

Because, the matters of the mind and heart matter.

What we experience – inside us and in the midst of others around us – shapes us. It matters, what we tell ourselves and rehearse in ourselves. It matters, what we surround ourselves with and what

shapes our world and ideas. It matters, how we allow God to stir and move and speak within and around us.

How we enter each day with openness and readiness set the stage for what we will see – for what we will not miss. Every day, God is calling us by name. Every day, God is saying to us and showing to us, “you are beloved.” What has prepared you to hear God speak to you in this way?

Jesus came to the Jordan River not on a whim, but compelled and drawn. Already ringing in him was a profound depth of desire to love and serve God and to love others as fully as possible. He knew his mother’s song of defiant hope and trust in God to lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things. He already had ringing in his heart the words of Isaiah the prophet that became his great declaration of purpose – “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... to bring good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, release to the captives, freedom to the oppressed, God’s favor to everyone.”

How are you ready in the way you open yourself now to God and to the world around you, to receive and welcome God’s embrace of you and call to you?

Because, with God’s naming and claiming you also comes a call and a clarity of higher purpose for your life. The picture just keeps getting bigger and brighter and more expansive and more wonderful and more amazing.

Let’s look back together at what we hear this morning from [Isaiah 42:1-9](#). Hear and read this as if listening to the voice of God speaking to Jesus, as what Jesus sensed God was claiming him and calling him to be.

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;

I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations...

*He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching...*

I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you;

*I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.*

Let yourself feel the depth of God’s voice for Jesus claiming and delighting in him at this moment. “This is my Son, BELOVED, in whom I delight.” And, behind and surrounding this, is the vision emerging in Jesus from God: “Here is my chosen, my delight. Here, you have my Spirit. Bring justice and care, healing and freedom. Be Light to all. See, all will be new!”

You are my chosen, my delight.

Here, you have my Spirit.

Bring justice and care, healing and freedom.

Be Light to all.

See, all will be new!

Being named, embraced, and claimed with delight carries us forward to also hear and share in God's desire for the whole world, and for the world we can touch. We begin to see with God's eyes. We begin to share God's passion. And we realize that our name and our belovedness comes with an opportunity.

What are the deep messages you have heard from God? What resonates most deeply and truly for you as your true name, your fullest identity, and most enticing and compelling sense of purpose?

So, of course we treasure these moments when God's presence has flowed over us, surrounded us, and shown and sung in us. The challenge then is to let those experiences truly change us – to take those moments as points in our lives when we turn, we change the way we act and think and feel. Often, in those moments, we can feel as if life will never be the same, and everything has indeed changed. But then life returns to normal, and we go back to our math lessons, and soccer practices, and washing dishes and cleaning our rooms, and deadlines at work and difficult clients... And if we are not attentive, if we do not remember our most sacred moments, the pressures of daily life can take us back to old habits and old ways of thinking and feeling. The challenge is to take those moments seriously as God's special name for us, and to let those moments bounce around in us and sink into our bones, so that we can know deeply the name that God has for each of us, the unique relationship that God has with each one of us. To remember those moments, to remember our names, and then out of gratitude to live our lives according to the new ways of being that we have discovered.

How, then, will you live this year? What new doors will you open, new paths will you follow, new people will you seek and engage, for the sake of how God has named and called you?

Baptism is a deep symbol and sacramental marking of all of God's epiphanies with us, and all of our big and little conversions throughout our lives. So friends, remember your baptism. Remember all the baptisms, the epiphanies, the cleansings and discoveries and turning points in your lives. Those moments are the moments in which God names you, bathes you in the Spirit's presence, and brings new ways of being into your body and soul. These are the sacred moments – and particularly shown to us in the coming weeks in the life of Jesus – that change us, mark us deeply as God's beloved children, and make us all that we are and more than we have been.

How, then, will you live this year?