

Epiphany 1 year A,

Jan 11, 2026

From baby to bathwater

The Rev Barbara Ballenger

Jesus has grown up quite a lot in one week. Last Sunday in Matthew's Epiphany story he was an infant visited by three astrologers bearing gifts to a house in Bethlehem. A star had shown them the way there, and a dream showed them the way out, avoiding Herod, who proved to be an untrustworthy leader.

In this past week, Jesus' family became refugees, escaping persecution and slaughter at Herod's hands and settling in Egypt for a time. Then with the death of Herod they were cleared to return, though fear caused them to settle in Nazareth, where Jesus, according to Matthew's Gospel, spent the rest of this childhood until today.

Now he is all grown up and headed to the baptism that John has been offering in the Jordan River in the desert just north of the Dead Sea¹. In the paragraphs before Jesus appears, John had arrived preaching to all who would listen that it was time to return to the covenant with God, for the Kingdom of God was drawing near. And he had some harsh words for Pharisees and Sadducees, leaders of Israel, who wanted to get in the water without fully living out their repentance. Which is to say it's no good returning to the covenant with God if you are not going to live it out.

Then up walks the Kingdom of God, up walks the covenant incarnate in the form of Jesus, asking to be baptized, himself. And even though John had been proclaiming the one who would come after him, I don't think John thought he'd be the next guy standing in the baptism line.

Here it's easy to get caught up with John's question on whether Jesus needed to get in that water and who was worthy to baptize whom. But note that John's baptism was not an act of repentance, but the thing you did after the covenant with God was firmly back in place. For just about everyone that required first turning away from the sinful life they had stumbled into and heading back to the life with God. By the time they got in the water, they were celebrating that covenant, immersed in the righteousness that flowed from it.

I believe that Jesus got into that water fully swimming with his Abba in that divine love. But when he got out of it he and God were doing something new together, something even better, something meant for everyone.

"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased," the divine voice announces to all who can hear, as the sky opens up and a dove lands on Jesus' head.

¹ Got Questions website -- <https://www.gotquestions.org/where-was-Jesus-baptized.html#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Gospel%20of%20Matthew%2C%20Jesus,John%20baptized%20him%20in%20the%20Jordan%20River%22.>

Now those in the area who knew their bible would know that God was quoting the Scriptures. Our passage from the 42nd chapter of Isaiah, which we heard today, explains what God meant.

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him, comes the echo from back in the days of Isaiah.

What is the task of this servant? To bring justice -- the Isaiah passage says it three times. And that justice will take the form of a light to the nations, the opening of eyes that are blind, the release of prisoners, both those in dungeons and those who are just lost in the dark. Jesus' baptism was not a personal act, but was something meant for everyone. Everything he does after that moment will have the same trajectory.

Establishing a Divine Kingdom marked by justice and peace for everybody -- this was the new thing that God was planning to do in partnership with the young man who rose out of the water, and who one day would rise out of the tomb.

And that is a particular comfort to any of us who are longing for justice and peace right now. Sometimes the Scriptures just jump off the page and land right into our own circumstances. And so with all those onlookers watching that trinitarian moment as Jesus stepped onto dry land, I say *me too* -- that's what I want too -- I want the foolish and ignorant to have their eyes opened up, the unjustly imprisoned to be released, and those tied up in their own selfishness and hatred to be freed to love in a way that undoes all the disasters they've caused.

This is the ministry that awaits Jesus after he dries off and heads deeper into the desert to be tempted with the things that tempt all of us, especially those with inordinate power.

When he returns from that journey, his hero and baptizer John will be facing death in prison, and Jesus will take up where John left off, but in a whole new way. This way will take us through the weeks after Epiphany to Lent and on toward Easter.

In a few minutes we will renew our own baptismal promises, which are really Easter promises. It's important to remember that we did not receive the same baptism Jesus did. Because Jesus entered water that initiated his ministry. Our baptism is our entry into the life on the other end of that ministry -- the life that ultimately dies on a cross and rises from a tomb, and takes us with it.

Still our own journey through baptism doesn't deposit us in Heaven, but it drops us right back into the dust of our daily lives. And we repeat these promises of baptism again and again because the times we are called to bring them to are ever changing, are always new.

So we renounce evil and embrace Jesus in the world we are in today. We state the beliefs that on any other Sunday take the form of the creed. We vow to continue to nourish ourselves in the teachings of our faith, in the strength of our community and the power of our Eucharistic celebrations.

We acknowledge that if we fall we can get up, turn ourselves around and be welcomed back.

And we ask for God's help with the really difficult work of being Christ's hands and feet in the world that's at hand. Proclaiming the Good News of a Loving God in all we say and do. Seeking and serving Christ in others. Striving for Justice and peace among all people and respecting the dignity of every human being.

I know that this is something that we do every year, something that we say in some form every week. It might seem like run of the mill stuff. But think about the world right now. Think about our country right now, and what is happening in our cities to the least among us and their allies.

Today I read a quote from the Episcopal Bishop Rob Hirschfeld of New Hampshire who spoke at a candlelight prayer vigil last night for Renee Good, the mother who was killed by ICE agents in Minnesota earlier this week. He said, "I have asked the clergy of the diocese to make sure their affairs are in order and they have written their wills. It's not the time for statements. It is time we put our bodies between the power of this world and the most vulnerable."

And that makes me think of that refugee child all grown up and rising out of the Jordan River with the divine words ringing in his ears. That is the one who beckons us to follow, who holds us as beloved, who sees our renewed efforts day after day and Epiphany after Epiphany and is well pleased.

Amen.