

Title: Committing to a New Beginning
Date: 1/8/2023 (Epiphany 1, Year A)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: 10:00 am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [Isaiah 42:1-9](#); [Acts 10:34-43](#); [Matthew 3:13-17](#); [Psalm 29](#)
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/pN9DbJR5NPc?t=412>

O God, you have called us in righteousness,
you have taken us by the hand and kept us.
As we enter this new year,
we pray that you grant us strength and the blessing of peace.
Amen.

Today, we celebrate the feast of the baptism of our Lord.

How many of you were baptized as babies? Teens? 20s and 30s? later?

I was baptized in 2010, but I had a chance to be baptized earlier. In my teens I was a member of a youth group at an evangelical church, and I loved being part of that community. I loved contemporary Christian music, I loved Winter Camp, and I loved my friends. When I told my parents I was thinking about being baptized, my father told me to wait.

“You’re just caught up in all the excitement right now. Wait until you’re 21.”

Being the obedient daughter I was, I waited. Never have I asked my dad why 21 was the magical age. Maybe he decided if I was old enough to drink, I’d be smart enough to decide this for myself. Maybe he thought that would be enough time for all that teenage excitement to wear off.

Soon after, I left that youth group.

They were telling me that my parents were going to hell because they weren’t Christian, and that didn’t sound like the loving God they’d been telling me about. They didn’t like that I was helping out with my mom’s Buddhist group, and that felt small-minded, small-hearted. In college, I tried out Intervarsity and Campus Crusade for Christ. I still loved the Easter Sunrise service, I still loved going into churches, and I still prayed, but only when things got hard.

When I was finally baptized, it felt like I had arrived. I had taken the long way around, the scenic route. When I looked back and squinted, I could see how God had led me to that moment. But when I was in the middle of it? No idea. And now, I was done, right?

At coffee hour, I thanked the priest who baptized me¹. She looked at me and said, “Congratulations! I’m looking forward to see what you do next.”

Next? What did she mean, “next”? I was looking at baptism as an end point, and she helped me see that it was also a starting point.

Today, we celebrate the baptism of our Lord. The reading assigned for today comes from Chapter 3 of the gospel according to Matthew. This is the third of twenty-eight chapters. In this gospel, this is the first time we hear him speak. This the first time we see him do anything.

And the first thing he did...was to ask John the Baptist to baptize him.

John said, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Mt 3:14).

Let's be clear. The people of Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region along the Jordan went to the wilderness to be baptized by John (Mt 3:5). Pharisees and Sadducees, people with great power and influence, went to the wilderness to try to convince John to baptize them. They went to John, not Jesus. They looked for John, not Jesus.

Yet, John didn't think he was qualified. He saw something in Jesus that made him feel unworthy to carry his sandals, let alone baptize him. The man who didn't hesitate to call people "a brood of vipers" hesitated to baptize Jesus. The man who baptized people and heard them confess their sins felt like maybe *he* needed to be baptized, *he* needed to confess *his* sins. John knew one who was more powerful than him was coming after him, and he sensed something in Jesus that told him that this might be him.

But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt 3:15).

Jesus knew that baptism was a sign. No magic happens at baptism. Yes, after Jesus' baptism, when he came out of the water the heavens were opened to him, he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and landing on him, and a voice from heaven said, "this is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

But it wasn't the baptism that made Jesus the Son of God. The baptism didn't make him beloved. The baptism didn't convince God to be pleased with him.

This isn't to say that baptism is unimportant. It is **very** important. This isn't to say that signs are unimportant, but they are important because they serve a purpose; they help tell a story. Water is water and a candle is a candle, but when they are part of a baptism, water points to death and rebirth, and a candle lit from the Paschal candle remind us that Jesus is the light of the world, and we who follow him have the light of life.

This is why Jesus told John to baptize him.

Though Jesus didn't have any sins to confess, he *was* repenting. The Greek word for repent is "metanoia."² It means to change, to make a turn, to transform. Confessing our sins, recognizing we could have made a different choice, is part of it. But that is not all of it. To repent means to go in a new direction, to change our mind, or to transform our life.

Jesus' life was taking him in a new direction, and he was about to go through some major changes. Perhaps he had always known he was the Son of God. Perhaps he had this growing awareness, a growing sense of purpose.

So, he came to John to be baptized, to signal his commitment to this new beginning.

According to the Book of Common Prayer, the Sacraments are a very special kind of sign. They are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace (BCP 857-858). The Two Great Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist remind us that God is with us, God has always been with us, and God will always be with us.

In a few moments, we will baptize Ella and Simon. In the Sacrament of Baptism, we recognize that they are beloved children of God, and with them God is well pleased. This doesn't mean they aren't beloved yet. This doesn't mean God is not pleased with them until water is poured over their head.

Because you have decided **for yourselves** to be baptized, this is a sign **to all of us here** that you know you are beloved children of God, and with you God is well pleased.

You are claiming an identity that has been yours to claim all along. This is a sign that you are ready for this new beginning. You will follow in the footsteps of Jesus. You will learn about your spiritual gifts and grow them and share them. You will officially become full members of the body of Christ, and we can't wait to see what you do next.

At the same time, we who witness their baptism will promise to do all in our power to support them in their life in Christ. We promise to care for them as siblings and brothers and sisters, to love them and remind them that they are beloved by God, no matter what they have done or left undone.

None of us have all the answers, none of us can be all things to all people, so we lean on each other. We learn from each other, whether the person is almost ten or twelve or five times twelve, whether the person is a lifelong Episcopalian, a self-described recovering Baptist, or someone who has marked this same beginning more recently.

Lastly, let us turn to these verses from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, has given **breath** to the people upon it and **spirit** to those who walk it.

The breath of God is already in us. The spirit of God is already upon us. God has called us to do right by God, to do right by one another. God has taken us by the hand and kept us close.

So, may we live as Jesus did. May we go about the world, doing good and bringing healing and wholeness to those who are oppressed by the forces of evil. May we preach

peace by sharing stories about the light that has opened our eyes and freed us from old expectations, old habits, old ways of being for this new life in Christ.

And when we doubt ourselves, when we really don't know what to do, may we remember that the voice that breaks cedar trees, and moves the earth and splits flames of fire has told us, US!, "You are my child, my beloved, and with you I am well pleased."

Amen.

¹ The Very Rev. Dr. Jane Shaw- I highly recommend this book of hers:
<https://www.churchpublishing.org/apracticalchristianity>

² Garrett, G. (2010). [Homiletical Perspective on Matthew 3:13-17](#). In D. L. Bartlett & B. B. Taylor (Eds.), *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A* (Vol. 1, pp. 237-239). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.