

Why Baptism Matters

Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Matthew 3:13-17
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Today the church calendar brings us to **Baptism of the Lord Sunday**. We stand with Jesus at the banks of the Jordan River. We hear the water moving. We see the crowds gathering. We feel the wilderness wind against our faces. And we watch as Jesus steps into the water. Before Jesus teaches us how to pray, before he tells us to love our enemies, before he turns over tables or heals the sick, before any sermon is preached, any miracle worked, any cross carried, he is named. "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased."

This moment is not just the **start of Jesus' public ministry**. It is the **grounding of his identity**. **Jesus does not discover who he is through what he does. He acts out of who he already knows himself to be. And that order matters.** Because we live in a world that flips the order entirely. We are told: You are what you accomplish. You are what you produce. You are what other people approve. We are told: Be impressive. Be efficient. Be productive. Even the church can slip into this sometimes: Serve more. Give more. Do more. Try harder. And it is so easy, isn't it, to turn faith into another project? Another thing we need to get right? Another test we might fail? But at the Jordan River, God interrupts all of that.

God speaks before Jesus has done anything worth writing home about. Before any achievement. Before any reputation. And God says one word that changes everything: **Beloved**. Not "useful." Not "successful." Not "impressive." Not "perfect." Beloved. **And if we hear nothing else today, hear this: That same word is spoken over us.**

Baptism of the Lord Sunday, therefore, is not only about Jesus' baptism. It is about our identity. It is about remembering who we are, and remembering whose we are. Whether baptized as an infant, a youth, or as an adult, the invitation is the same for all of us: **Remember your baptism.** Not as a scrapbook moment, but as a living reality. Martin Luther, when he grew tired or afraid or overwhelmed, would say simply, "I am baptized." Not "I was baptized once upon a time," but **I am baptized**—present tense. This identity is still true. This grace is still real. This claim still holds.

The Book of Order in our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) describes baptism as:

- union with Christ
- incorporation into the church
- the sign of new life in Christ
- the beginning of a life of discipleship

In other words, baptism is not just about **getting washed**. It is about **getting named**. It is about getting located in God's story. At the baptismal font we often use words like forgiveness and cleansing—and rightly so. But Baptism of the Lord Sunday pushes us to listen even deeper. Baptism says: Before nationality. Before political party. Before profession. Before even family identity. **You belong to God. You are claimed. You are named. You are loved.** And when our identity is rooted in grace—really rooted in grace—

your and my service becomes joy. Not frantic. Not guilt-driven. Not exhausted and bitter. Joyful. Grounded. Free.

When Jesus comes up from the water, the heavens open, the Spirit descends like a dove, and the voice of love is spoken aloud. This is beautiful. It is holy. It is powerful.

The Book of Order tells us that in baptism we are called into **participation in Christ's ministry**. So baptism is not simply about **who we are**. It is about **who we are for**. We are baptized not to escape the world, but to engage it. Not to hide in certainty, but to walk into compassion. Not to become spiritual consumers, but to become Christ-shaped servants.

Every time someone is baptized here, we — the congregation — say words together. We promise:

- to nurture them in faith
- to surround them with love
- to model justice and compassion
- to walk with them and learn from them

Those words are not polite formalities. They are vows. They are a way of life. In our Presbyterian understanding, **baptism is not a private contract between the individual and God. It is a public belonging**. We are incorporated—again, that Book of Order word—incorporated into the body of Christ. And that body exists not for its own comfort, not for its own preservation, but for **the life of the world**. Which means baptismal people are people who: feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, tell the truth in love, advocate for justice, and refuse to let despair have the last word. That is not extra credit Christianity. That is baptismal identity lived out loud.

So What Does This Mean for Us—Right Now? It means that when you hear condemning voices in your head saying, "You are not enough," your baptism says back, "You are beloved." It means when the world tells you your worth is what you produce, your baptism whispers, "**Your worth is received, not achieved.**" It means when faith feels like a burden, a list of tasks, a schedule of meetings—your baptism invites you home to grace. And when the needs of the world seem too overwhelming, when grief is too heavy, when justice feels too slow coming, as it does now—**your baptism does not take you out of the struggle. But it roots you in a love deeper than fear.**

So today, on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, I invite you — gently but seriously — to remember. Remember your baptism. Remember the God who named you. Remember the Christ who walks with you. Remember the Spirit who sends and sustains you. And if you cannot remember the actual physical day, remember this spiritual truth: The God who spoke love over Jesus speaks love over you. Right now. Today. Not after you get better, not after you believe more strongly, not after you finally get life figured out. Now.

"You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased." From that identity flows calling. We do not serve to earn love. We serve to embody it. We do not act out of fear. We act out of freedom. We do not give because we must. We give because we belong.

Beloved and sent.

Claimed and commissioned.

Held by grace and poured out in love.

That's why baptism matters!

Thanks be to God.

Amen.