

# New Beginnings / Letting Go

## Baptism of the Lord Sunday

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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
January 8, 2023

Today is the first Sunday in the liturgical church season of Epiphany. It lasts until Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the season of Lent. The word, "**epiphany**" literally means an "appearance" or "manifestation." It has also come to mean any moment of great or sudden revelation or realization. We often refer to these as "ah-ha" moments. In a biblical context, however, it basically **refers to when someone recognizes the Presence of God in Jesus of Nazareth.**

For instance, on the Day of Epiphany, January 6 (the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas), the church reads the story of the magi, commemorating the recognition of the manifestation of the Sacred Presence of God in the Christ child, Jesus. On the first Sunday of Epiphany, the assigned lectionary gospel reading, whether from Matthew, Mark, or Luke, is always the story of Jesus' baptism, his initiation into his public ministry. It is categorized as an epiphany story for the same reason, "And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'" (Matt. 3:16-17, NRSV).

In past years, I have used the occasion of the Baptism of the Lord Sunday to reflect upon **the meaning of baptism in our Presbyterian tradition, known as Reformed theology.** As you probably know, it differs in important ways from Baptist theology concerning baptism. I have also focused on the pronouncement of Jesus being called by God, "**the beloved,**" extending that to each and every person, for **we are also called the beloved by God.** And there have been times of reflecting upon **baptism as our call to action, the living out our of faith in our daily lives** – our discipleship, the way we follow the ways and teachings of Jesus.

As important as those themes are, thus wanted to briefly mention them again today, I'll be going in a different direction this morning. And the jumping off point is just one specific element of our understanding of baptism. **Our baptism functions somewhat as an initiation into the family of God, marking a starting point and a new beginning in our journey of faith.** It's not a coincidence that this Baptism of the Lord Sunday comes at the beginning of each New Year.

Even though January 1<sup>st</sup> is simply another day, the one that follows December 31<sup>st</sup>, there is something special and symbolic in the turning of the yearly calendar. Yes, we are still basically the person that we were the day before, but there is also a strong desire in most people to seek a way to begin again. Perhaps like hitting the "reset" button. **But is it really possible to clean the slate and make a new start? Christianity loudly declares, YES. That is thanks to God's forgiving love and grace, a God of second chances and new beginnings. And that too, can be extended to us as people who offer**

**ourselves and others second chances and new beginnings, especially in troubled relationships.**

Fresh starts are challenging, however, because we are working with the same person who is part of the past – ourselves. It has been shown that **it is often difficult to leave the past behind because somehow it is comfortable. We grow accustomed to behaving and responding in old familiar ways and patterns, whether they are healthy or not.** But yes, fresh starts are possible. And it begins, as you might expect, with some **serious reflection and a committed desire to change.**

In years past, I have shared a **metaphor concerning a backpack.** It goes like this. Each of us carries around a backpack, metaphorically, filled with all the events, thoughts, and feelings of the past. Think of what you carry around in your backpack. Then ask yourself: **What would you like to take out of your backpack and leave behind as you journey into this new year?** In other words, what would be most beneficial to your well-being, your body, mind, and spirit to *let go*? To help with that I have become very fond of a **poem by Steve Garnaas-Holmes entitled, *Letting Go*.** As a reminder, there is a copy of it pinned to the wall above the copier in the church office work room. I have included it as a bulletin insert, and I would like us to read it now together.

### ***Letting Go***

As I step into the new year  
 I let go of the old one.  
 What I have done I have done.  
 What I have not done I have not done.  
 So be it. I release my regret.  
 I stand with myself.

For all the gifts I have received,  
 known and unknown, I am grateful...  
 For however I have failed or fallen short,  
 I forgive myself. I learn and move on.

I release my fears.  
 I release my self-doubt, blame and self-silencing.  
 My hopes and dreams I place in God's hands,  
 trusting what is blessed will remain with me.

I am alive, and life is good.  
 I open myself to the future,  
 enfolded in this present.  
 Holy Mystery, I am yours.  
 I am here, now.

Playing off the line, "...trusting what is blessed will remain with me," and returning to the metaphor of the backpack, now ask yourself: **What would you like to continue to carry with you in your backpack as you journey into this new year?** In other words, what qualities, what people, what activities, what routines and other things do you want to keep, those things that have been beneficial to your well-being, your body, mind, and spirit?

Finally, ask yourself: **What would you like to add to your backpack as you journey into this new year?** In other words, what do you need to add or do *differently* in your life in order to benefit your well-being, your body, mind, and spirit? You may also want to ask: How do I want to feel? Who do I want to be? What do I want to create? What would it take to help you assess and meet those goals?

**Using a different metaphor, perhaps we can think of all this as a kind of personal, as well as communal, physical, mental, and spiritual detox.** Now, it's fairly easy to understand a **physical detox**, primarily through a change in eating habits, more exercise, and getting enough sleep - anything that is more beneficial to your body. Perhaps it's a bit harder to envision and enact a **mental and spiritual detox**. This might help. **What have you been putting into your mind, your feelings, and your spirit that is toxic – to yourself and others? What might you need to do to change that, perhaps even to the extent of being transformed in one way or another?** For many, including myself, therapeutic counseling of one kind or another can be very beneficial. All in all, try to **focus on what really matters in your life** (and that's not being selfish), including your overall well-being, and the well-being of your relationships.

All of these new beginnings and fresh starts can be grounded in our understanding of living out our baptism – our starting point of transformation. All of which is possible through the indwelling Sacred Presence of the Divine.

I, and perhaps many of you, are **starting to have a sense of a new beginning as we crawl out of the most oppressive elements brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, especially the isolation and the lack of meaningful fellowship.** Our Christmas Eve Candlelight Service of Lessons and Carols a few weeks ago certainly felt like a new beginning. Since this service was our first in-person gathering here in the sanctuary in 3 years, there was a special feeling about the experience of gathering, worshiping, and celebrating together. It truly felt like we were "being" the church.

So, let us look for, and even initiate, new beginnings in our personal lives, and in the life and ministry of this community of faith. And remember, as part of that process, may we be **filled with the courage to engage in letting go.**

Amen.