

# Baptism:

## Relationships, Service, Purpose

### Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Luke 3:15-16, 21-22    Isaiah 43:1-7  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
January 12, 2025

Last Sunday, we celebrated, a day early, the Day of Epiphany, the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas. We explored the story of the magi's journey and the epiphany of recognizing Jesus as the Christ child. At that time, we also entered into the **season of Epiphany**, which lasts until Ash Wednesday, marking the beginning of the season of Lent.

Let me repeat from last week that the Greek word **epiphany** literally means **"manifestation" – an appearance or a revelation of something previously unknown or hidden**. In the broadest sense of the term, an epiphany is an occasion when something either appears or is revealed to you. It is often described as an illuminating discovery, a new insight or revelation, especially one that comes unexpectedly. That is why we often call these "Aha" moments. In a spiritual setting, an epiphany is often used to describe the revelation or experience of the Divine or Sacred in our midst. And **in a biblical context, an epiphany story includes those occasions when the Presence of God is revealed in and through Jesus**. From the perspective of the gospel writers, these stories are meant to reveal a clearer understanding of Jesus' identity, thus a clearer understanding of the nature and character of God.

Now, the Sunday following the Day of Epiphany, like today, is always designated on the liturgical church calendar as **Baptism of the Lord Sunday**. It is also considered an epiphany story because after Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit descends upon him in the form of a dove. And a voice from heaven declares, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). This **reveals that the manifestation of God's Presence is made known and can be found in Jesus**. It was the gospel writer's way of revealing: **If you want to know what God is like, look at who Jesus is, hear what Jesus says, and pay attention to what Jesus does**. That's why, as Christians, we can declare that **Jesus is the decisive revelation of the nature and character of God**. And a progressive Christianity perspective would add: yet, not necessarily the only revelation or manifestation of the Divine.

That's a primary theological purpose of the story of Jesus' baptism. But there is also a practical side to this story. Through his baptism, Jesus is commissioned and empowered by the Holy Spirit for his public ministry and work in the world. But wait, there's more. Just as with Jesus, **your baptism signifies that you are also called and empowered by the indwelling Presence of God's Spirit to further the ways of God's – ways of love, compassion, peace, forgiveness, inclusion, reconciliation, justice, and hope. You are chosen, called by God by name! You are empowered! You are beloved! You, and each of us, have a valued place in the family of God**. And because of that,

nobody can tell you or me our lives don't matter. Nobody can tell us we are unloved. Nobody can tell us we don't belong.

Speaking of belonging, that's a crucial element of the meaning of our baptism. **Baptism creates community** and that's fundamental in our understanding of being followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus. Therefore, of all the many things that can be said about the meaning of our baptism, I want to focus on the part of being together as a community of faith.

Just this past week, retiring **US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy** released his final diagnosis and parting prescription to us as a nation. **We are suffering from a deficiency of connectivity.** To treat the "widespread pain and unhappiness" that has left the country deeply unwell, he says, his "parting prescription" for the American people is to cultivate a strong sense of community to help themselves and others. Murthy writes in his essay published last Tuesday, "**Community is a powerful source of life satisfaction and life expectancy. It's where we know each other, help each other, and find purpose in contributing to each other's lives.**" He could just as well be describing an important function of being connected to a community of faith.

**Building community creates fulfillment**, he said, and there are three key elements that make it possible:

- **connection with others through relationships,**
  - **acts of service to help others**
  - **and a sense of purpose in life**
- all pursued through love, instead of fear or hate.

Murthy writes, "**Relationships, service, and purpose are the time-tested triad of fulfillment that stands in contrast to wealth, fame, and power which define the modern-day triad of success.** The triad of success is focused on the individual. The triad of fulfillment connects us with something bigger than the individual. The triad of success may earn us praise and possessions. The triad of fulfillment gives us meaning and belonging." **Murthy highlights their ability to reduce risks of loneliness, depression, even physical illnesses.**

Perhaps most importantly, Murthy adds, "**To build community requires love.** Love not as sentimentality, but as a commanding force with the power to build, strengthen, and heal. **Love as generosity and kindness. Love as hope and grace. Love as courage.**"

I strongly believe in the prescription of connectivity, this triad of fulfillment, reflecting a meaning of our baptism, includes the building and strengthening of relationships; being called in service to others; and having a strong sense of purpose in life. It's just what the doctor ordered for us here at College Hill.

**We can build on this triad throughout 2025** as we intentionally work to grow closer in relationship to one another and to the world around us through our service, giving purpose to our life and ministry together.

**Let us always, as a foundation to our very existence, choose community!**

Amen.

Resource:

Deidre McPhillips, CNN, "To heal America's ills, outgoing surgeon general offers 'parting prescription': stronger community", January 7, 2025.