



Baptism of our Lord, Lectionary 1, Year A
Bishop Don Kreiss, Southeast Michigan Synod
Gospel Text - Matthew 3:13-17

Matthew 3:13-17

¹³ Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

SERMON TEXT:

Dear Ones, dear Friends,
Grace to you and peace, from God our Father
and from our Lord Jesus Christ, who told John the Baptist:
It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.

Jesus didn't **have to be** baptized, you know.

There was in those days no theology
regarding the necessity of the sacrament of water and the word.

In fact, there was, in those days,
no *theology* about either sacrament at all
—that would come later, years after the Last Supper
when the Church felt obliged to get its act together
in terms of explaining why it was doing *what* it was doing—
but in this part of the story,
on that morning along the banks of the Jordan River,
John has the *practice* of baptism well in hand
without needing to worry about the theology attached to it.

So as Matthew remembers it, there was John, there was the river,
and on this one particular day there was Jesus as well
—suddenly, without warning.

There was Jesus.

Without angels, without shepherds, without wise men,
without mother or father,
without a single member of the cast of characters
That have surrounded him since Christmas.

And John doesn't know what to do about it, not at first.

He had been preaching you see,
and calling the crowds to repentance, because,
as he was fond of warning them: *The Kingdom of God is at hand!*

That was the whole thrust of John's message, and he'd gotten good at delivering it and the people were eager to hear it, because there were crowds there on the riverbanks, throngs of folks pushing their way into the water in order to be washed by John.

Now, just what shape the kingdom would take,

- And how you could recognize it when it came,
- And how you would go about entering it,
- And how you should behave once you got there

All of those were details that John was still working out.

For the moment it was enough for him, and it was enough for the crowds as well, to know that change was coming, that fire was coming, and what was necessary, therefore, was to repent, and be washed, and to watch for the one who was to come, the one who would bring in the new kingdom.

That was what John was doing, anyway.

Wearing the prophet's uniform of camel hair and leather belt. Subsisting only on what the Lord provided. Not manna, in his case, but locusts and wild honey.

And every day he was washing those who had come to him, and out of all the rivers in Israel it was no accident that he had chosen to do that washing in the Jordan River, there in the wilderness of Judea.

Because the Jordan, you may remember, was one of the boundaries of Israel.

It marked the edge of the land God had promised to Abraham, it marked the difference between *having a refuge* and *being a refugee*, it was the border between hope and despair.

And John was there.

Minding his own business—or at least going on as he understood he needed to: warning the people that change was coming and calling members of the religious establishment harsh names like “brood of vipers.”

And suddenly there was Jesus.

And even if John didn’t have it all worked out; even if his baptismal practice was way ahead of his baptismal theology, John immediately understood that Jesus’ appearance in the river that day changed all the rules.

“John would have prevented him,”

Matthew remembers, although Matthew is quiet about what John wanted to prevent, and how, exactly, John thought he could have stopped Jesus at the water’s edge remains a mystery.

And in a moment of startling vulnerability,
John spoke to Jesus in a simple confession,
recognizing that everything he had *done*
and *taught* and *preached* was not nearly enough:

I need to be baptized by you,"

John said,

"and do you come to me?"

Dear Ones, can you hear the wonder in John's voice?
And from where we're sitting this morning,
can you get a glimpse of what it means
for a prophet to see his prophesy standing in front of him?

Can you imagine what it would be like to see and know
Without any warning

- That all your hopes
- That all your dreams
- That everything you had ever dared believe in was waiting
patiently in front of you, saying:

Let it be so for now.

It is an amazement that John
could even remember how to do
what he had been doing for so long,
but somehow he does,
and Jesus was baptized in the Jordan
on a day that was suddenly so remarkably, so profoundly different
from all the other days that had ever been.

For as Jesus was baptized in the river
that had marked a boundary for the Children of Israel,
the voice of God breaks forth,
"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased"
and in that moment the boundary between heaven and earth is
erased.

That's why we remember and celebrate this day:
not only that Jesus was baptized,
but that through his baptism
the separation between heaven and earth is ended,
and that even now, through the sacrament of baptism
we are allowed to stand on the edge of what we know
and with the eyes of faith
to look over for just a moment to the other side:
to the home we have been promised,
to the abiding refuge we seek,
and to the hope that can endure all despair.

Baptism is about a **gift** we receive with Jesus.
But more than that,
baptism is about a new **identity** we receive with Jesus:
through water and the word we are claimed
as the beloved children of God,
and that new identity leads us for the rest of our lives:

First into community with one another;
And finally to the cross with Christ himself:
 to work toward peace,

to bring a message of hope,
and to strive with all our fellow creatures
for the redemption of all creation.

Dear Ones,

On this Sunday as we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord,
you might consider modeling some aspects of your
congregational ministry after John the Baptist's.
(Though not the ending part.)

First: notice that John works on the edge,
on the boundary, in the wilderness of Judea.

That is, in fact, where the prophets have always done their best work, and is the place where the church and its people are desperately needed to stand today.

Never forget that the mission that comes with baptism must take you *beyond* the walls of the church,
outside the congregation,
into the community and the world we share,
to care for the poor, to feed the hungry,
to welcome the stranger
and all those who live on the margins of society.

Second, don't let the fact that you may not have all the answers get in the way of your *hands'* ability
or your *heart's* willingness to act and to do what is right and good.

John baptized those came to him with water, even as he knew that the one coming after him would baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit.

You will not be able to solve every problem or heal every wound that arises in your congregation or community, but do not, therefore, give up or give up hope.

Our God is not limited by what we can accomplish.

Third, even in the midst and the busy-ness of his ministry, John had the grace to recognize that Jesus was standing before him.

Know that the people you serve and live alongside can speak Jesus' words to you, can share Jesus' love with you, and will be the signs of God's unfailing love and mercy in the times when you need it most and the times when you least expect it.

Minister to each other and honor your baptismal vocations; be accountable to each other. It is good practice for all of us.

Jesus didn't have to be baptized. But his baptism became for us a sign of God's invitation to begin a new life, and an occasion for the Holy Spirit to break into our world in a new and powerful way.

Let us celebrate that invitation, then,
and remember our baptisms,
and give thanks to the Holy Spirit
who has brought us this far along the journey.

Amen.

Copyright © 2026 *The Sermon Supply*

This work is the intellectual property of clergy from the synods of Region 6 of the ELCA. It is provided for use by congregations within these synods for worship, study, and other ministry purposes.

This project is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License \(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0\)](#).

This means:

- Congregations may use and share this material for **non-commercial purposes**, provided proper attribution is given to the *The Sermon Supply* and its contributors.
- The material **may not be modified or adapted** without explicit permission.
- Use beyond congregational purposes requires permission from the contributors.

For permissions beyond this license, please contact rwiessler@neos-elca.org

License Details: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition. Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.