

January 12

[Matthew 3:13-17](#)

Well Pleased Baptism of the Lord

Another stand-alone service, this one is designed to give a sense of solidarity with Jesus by joining him in the experience and confession of baptism. Though John's baptism was one of repentance from sin, Jesus submitted to the ritual as a way of standing with us, claiming there was no limit to God's overwhelming love. It would be a most appropriate celebration of this event by sharing corporately in an act of remembrance of baptism for the whole congregation.

Planning Notes

*Baptism is not only a sign of profession and mark of difference
whereby Christians are distinguished from others that are not baptized;
but it is also a sign of regeneration or the new birth.*

*The Baptism of young children is to be retained in the Church.
(from "The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church," Article XVII, p. 69, The United
Methodist Book of Discipline, 2016)*

THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

[\(January 12, 2020\)](#)

Liturgical Color: White / Gold

Five Universal Symbols: Cross, Oil, Water, Baptismal Font, Scallop Shell (symbol of birth, resurrection)

THE BAPTISMAL / COVENANT RENEWAL SERVICE

Call to Worship

Leader: We gather to worship the Living Water!

People: **Spring up, Oh Well, within our souls¹.**

Leader: In our dry and arid places, Water of Baptism, refresh us.

People: **Stir up inside of us, renew us Living Water.**

¹ Lyndell Leatherman, arr. "Spring up Oh Well, Unknown" (Kansas City, MO: Lillenas Publishing, 1982), 92.

Leader: The baptism of the Ethiopian official of Candace, sovereign queen of Ethiopia, remind us of our connection to both the first church and the eternal Well that never runs dry.

People: **[Burst forth] within us, overflow, saturate the stagnant areas of our lives, reconnect us to [you, our true Source].**

Leader: Let us remember our baptism and be thankful!

People: **Take us to the waters! Let us renew our baptismal vows. Amen.**

Call to Confession

How often we forget or neglect our covenant and baptismal vows. Teach us to live like those who have accepted the obligation, the responsibilities of baptized believers.

Confession

Covenant God, you made us your people and gave your Son as a pledge of your love. It was by his blood that we were baptized into relationship with you. Yet, we make trivial both his blood and the water, which symbolizes our entry into the church. Forgive us our sins. Restore us to harmony with you, we pray.

Words of Assurance

Truly, God shows no partiality, but, in every nation, anyone who will give God reverence, and do no harm, is acceptable. Thanks be to God!

Responsive Reading – Isaiah 42:1-8

Leader: Jesus was the Suffering Servant, chosen by God, born of Mary, and baptized by John.

People: **The Holy Spirit rested upon him and God [spoke] from the heavens, for baptism is a family affair.**

Leader: Through the baptism, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, justice has been seen by every nation.

People: **He never resorted to violence but worked faithfully to model and teach justice and equality.**

Leader: His Spirit is alive in us today. We cannot grow faint; we will not be crushed. God's reign will be established throughout the earth.

People: **The Lord of Host, Creator of Heaven and Earth, has called us to right living, taken us by our feeble hands, given strength to our knees, and kept us to this day.**

Leader: You are a covenant, a light, the vision to prisoners, yet enslaved.

People: **Steadfast is our God. We offer God praise and glory, for the promises of God are faithful and true.**

Unison: **The Lord strengthens us and blesses us with shalom!**

Offertory Invitation

The covenant was initiated by God of all. Whatever we give is a gift we have already received. Give from a grateful heart.

Offertory Praise

The voice of the Lord thunders over the waters; the God of glory thunders. We worship God in Holy Splendor with our giving.

Benediction

Leader: Once again we have been refreshed by the waters of baptism.

People: **Let it be so now; for it is proper for us, in this way, to fulfill all righteousness.**

Leader: The heavens are opened to you, the Holy Spirit is available to you, and God affirms,

"You are my beloved, well-pleasing in my sight!"

People: **May it always be so! Amen.**

This service was taken from *Trumpet in Zion: Black Church Worship Resources* (Abingdon) by the late Rev. Dr. Linda Hollies, who was a prolific author, motivational speaker, and champion of issues around social justice for women. She had served as senior pastor in several United Methodist Churches in the Michigan area at the time of her death (2007).

Dr. Hollies wrote twenty-nine books, many designed to be inspirational to women including *Those Bodacious Women: Life Lessons from One Sister to Another* (Pilgrim Press). Transcribed by Rev. Dr. Cynthia A. Wilson (2019).

Preaching Notes

The beginning of a new year is an appropriate time for the church to pause and reflect. This is one of reason that we designed these two stand-alone services back to back. In addition, people have the chance to get back in the rhythm of church attendance after the holidays.

These two services can serve as markers to the church's identity. In a time of unsettledness, we come back to some foundational theology of who we are as a people. We began with an awestruck reflection on the activity of God, who chose to put on flesh and dwell among us. Epiphany is core to our understanding of who Jesus is, and it is worthy of reaffirmation in the life of the church each year.

This week, we pause again and reflect on the gift given to us as we claim the grace of Jesus Christ through our baptism. This is an appropriate time to celebrate baptism in the life of the church. If there are those who are ready for baptism – families with children to be baptized, or youth or adults who are seeking to join with the faith and the church – this is the perfect time to focus on baptism. In addition, or in place of new baptisms, a reaffirmation of the baptismal vows will remind everyone of the vows made and the grace received through the water of baptism.

The text focuses on Jesus' baptism in the Gospel of Matthew; therefore, the sermon needs to lift this event first and foremost. Yet, the whole reason that Jesus chose to participate in John's call to a baptism of repentance is to express solidarity with sinful people in need of grace. We are all present with Jesus in that water and can rightly celebrate our baptism as we honor his.

Yet Matthew understates the whole event in typical style. You can almost miss the weight of this moment in the scant five verses that are given to telling the story. All the questions we really need answered are seemingly unimportant to Matthew. The issues that caused debates and division – how much water was used and the precise liturgical wording of the ritual – don't appear in the account.

Having waded through John's words during Advent, we now get to the point. Jesus appears, Matthew tells us, to be baptized by John. John has as much of a problem with this as we do, you'll notice. Matthew is the only one to give us this conversation. Perhaps the intent is to help explain this odd behavior on the part of Jesus. "Let it be so for now," Jesus says. The "now" is important. Now is about the identification with humanity, not about the essential nature of the Christ. Or rather, Christ's essential nature is about that identification. The "righteousness" he is

fulfilling is the righteousness of the mission. I can be who I need to be in this way, perhaps. I can do what I am here to do in this way.

Then John consented. Reluctantly? It seems so. Consented doesn't sound like wholehearted support. The Greek here could be translated *tolerates, lets go, releases*. Maybe John has misgivings; he doesn't see the bigger picture yet. But he consented. At least we assume so, since Matthew says nothing about the actual baptism. The very next verse says "when Jesus had been baptized"; we missed it! We didn't even get a chance to get our cameras out for a photo with the pastor!

Perhaps we've been wrestling with the wrong stuff. Maybe it isn't about the amount of water used or the position of the body being baptized. Maybe it isn't about the right formula or specific words spoken. Maybe it isn't about the person being baptized at all. Maybe it's about the relationship being established in that sacrament – a relationship with the God who pours down grace and a relationship with the community that receives the grace-filled new member of the body of Christ.

John might have been uncertain, unable to see the big picture, but the voice from heaven proclaimed that God was not hesitant and claimed this moment wholeheartedly. The heavens opened, the Spirit descended, and the voice spoke. "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

So, who was all that for, that opening of heaven and the voice from on high? Matthew says, "He saw the Spirit," indicating it was a private vision. But the voice says, "This is my beloved," not. "You are." It seems to be an announcement to everyone. Other versions are just as vague. Who is it for, this theophany, this appearance of the Godhead?

Clearly, it is for us. The readers, the church that would be constituted by baptism; that's why Matthew tells us this story. It is so that we know, first, that Jesus claimed solidarity with us by submitting to a baptism of repentance, even though he was without sin. But we also know we share in the pleasure of God who claims us as beloved children. First, this is about Jesus, the one we follow, the one we are making disciples of. Then, it is about us. So celebrate baptism, celebrate belonging, celebrate that God is well pleased with the body of Christ. And always invite. Call folks forward into this celebration of the body, in to the joy of the Lord. It is an appropriate time for an invitation to discipleship, the right time for an altar call.