

The meaning of our baptism

First Sunday after the Epiphany – The Baptism of our Lord

January 11, 2026

The two most important times of the year for us as Christians are Christmas and Easter. We recently celebrated Christmas, remembering the birth of Jesus and the divine incarnation as God took on human flesh. And Easter, when we received the promise of resurrection life as Jesus rose from the tomb.

But I believe today, as Baptism of our Lord Sunday, should be given greater significance for our lives. Today we are called to remember not only Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River, but our own baptism as well. We should take some time to remember the stories our families told us about that long ago day when we were infants. Or, if we were older, to remember the events of that day. Soon I will explain why this day should be so important for us.

I remember vividly the day of my baptism. It was forty-six years and eight months ago. I was stationed as a Marine on Okinawa, Japan. For a little under a year, I had been attending a small evangelical charismatic church, along with other service members. On that blustery November day, I, and about eight to ten other individuals from our church drove down to the shore of the East China Sea. Desiree Franklin was among them. I could not have known at the time that three years later she would be my wife.

We all stood on the shore, with the wind blowing in our faces as we held a dry towel, waiting to hand it off to the next soaking wet person who came

out of the surf. One-at-a-time each of us carefully made our way into the cold water and over the coral to where our pastor Chuck Kidd waited for us. He plunged each of us under the water, baptizing us in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. I remember wondering if God would give me any special spiritual gift that day.

Today's Gospel tells the story of Jesus' baptism. It opens with John the Baptizer knee deep in the waters of the Jordan River, wearing a camel hair tunic and leather belt as he shouted out to the masses of people on the shore: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!" Those who stood there listening to him, were city dwellers and rural folk; tradesmen and craftsmen and soldiers and the temple police and tax collectors and Roman soldiers and women and children. For years the prophet John had been combing the scriptures and listening closely to read the signs of the times. He knew that a political and social storm was brewing; that the beginning of the reign of God was very near; the Messiah, the savior would be revealed very soon to the people of Israel, and so, he headed down to the Jordan to begin his work.

As he baptized, he watched and waited. He knew that the Jewish people must get ready. They needed to repent. As Israel's ancient prophet had said; every windy road must be made straight and every hill made low for the coming of the Lord. The people must turn and change and begin to bear fruit worthy of repentance.

As the people gathered near the water's edge, John told them that those who had two coats must give one to the poor, and those who had food should do likewise. He told the tax collectors not to pocket a little extra money for themselves, and for the Roman soldiers to be satisfied with their pay.

On that day a line formed as the people walked into the water to be baptized, slowly making their way towards John. John occasionally kept an eye on the shore, scanning the crowds, looking for someone. And on that day he finally spotted him, Jesus, making his way down the hill. John's heart began to beat a little faster. He continued to baptize each person while also watching Jesus. John was a bit shocked to see Jesus getting in line for baptism along with all the rest. John must have wondered what Jesus was doing following the crowd forward for baptism. He knew that Jesus had no need for baptism, for he was no ordinary sinner in need of ritual cleansing and repentance. John knew who Jesus really was, the lamb of God that would take away the sins of the world; the savior; the king from David's line; the one who would soon gather the people for an armed revolt against Rome.

When it was finally Jesus' turn to be baptized, the two men faced each other. The two men knew each other. John felt nervous and uncomfortable. As they stood there for several awkward moments, the line behind Jesus grew longer. John finally spoke first: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" John was not going to have this. A mental tug-of-war ensued between Jesus and John. John stood his ground, Jesus stood his.

John may have been thinking: “I’m the one in need of baptism today, certainly not you, our Messiah!” Jesus replied to John: “Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Jesus knew how important even HIS baptism was; how important this work of baptism would be for all of God’s children. We are told that as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw God’s Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And the voice of his Father whispered to him: “You are my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

I believe that in the very moment you and I were anointed by God in baptized, God was thinking the same thing about us: “You are my child, my beloved, with you I am well pleased.” None of us will ever know how significant that moment in our lives was. But let me try and explain its significance this way.

Within the Episcopal church we recognize how important vocational ordained ministry is. Yesterday I attended our annual Diocesan Vocation Information Day. I and four other individuals talked about vocation and discernment to a group that included members of the clergy, those discerning a potential call to ministry, and their spouses. My talk was on the meaning of vocation. And I was about to explain to them about the connection between vocational ministry and our baptism.

I told those in attendance, that, although we were there to discuss possible vocational discernment as a deacon or priest, there is another vocation that

applies to all of us. Here is what I told them, which was not only for them, but is vitally important for each of us today:

There is another very important vocation that we need to talk about...This other vocation, is the foundational and grounding vocation of your life and mine. It is one that we each entered many years ago.

The Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer mentions this foundational vocation. Here is what it says:

Question: Who are the ministers of the Church?

Answer: The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons.

Why does it include lay persons in the list of ministers? And more importantly, why are lay persons mentioned first, BEFORE bishops, priests, and deacons? Why? Because I believe that the vocational calling as a lay person is the foundational ministry in the church.

All of us who are members of the church have crossed the threshold into this foundational vocation. Maybe it happened when you were an infant or a young child, or possibly as an adult. I told those gathered yesterday about my baptism, and told them that it was my baptism, and it was your baptism, where each of us has crossed a threshold into this foundational vocational ministry as lay persons. On that day, God had called you and me into the family of God, into the Christian church. This is why your baptism is so significant.

As you began to grow in the faith, you learned about Jesus and the Son of God and the Father and the Holy Spirit. You learned about the teachings of the church and the history of the church. You became active in ministry. You learned about grace and confession and repentance, and, hopefully, about God's desire for you to be born again, and again, and again, as you continued to be transformed more and more into the image of Jesus Christ.

At your baptism and my baptism, each of us entered the family of God as children of God. And it is my firm belief that God views this, as our most important "vocation" and calling, to continue to grow and develop and change in your faith and understanding over the years. God's ultimate goal for each of us, is not to become a bishop or priest or deacon. No, God's ultimate goal for us is that we continue to allow God to perform that transformational work within us, towards becoming, one day, something that very few have ever fully obtained, that of becoming a completely whole, fully integrated human being. Someone who recognizes their oneness with God, and who is fully awake and alive and in love with God and all humanity and all of creation. That is God's ultimate goal for each of us in this, our foundational vocation.

We move towards this, God's goal for us, as we attend services regularly and receive communion and pray and maybe say morning or evening prayer regularly. In other words, we establish a habit of following a Rule of Life, a set of spiritual disciplines.

This life of faith, your life of faith, it began at your baptism. That is why this Baptism of our Lord day is so important. It was the beginning of your vocational ministry as a lay person. And it is through our baptism that God makes us One with all our brothers and sisters in Christ, no matter our differences – no matter our differences. And our baptism was the beginning of a journey of transformation that will never end this side of eternity.

Baptism unites us. Baptism transforms us; more and more into the full image of Jesus Christ. May we continue the journey.