

New St. James Presbyterian Church

Baptism of the Lord

Sunday, January 11, 2026

“And Do You Come to Me?”

Matthew 3:13-17

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

Why are we baptized? Why, in the church, do we practice baptism? What is the meaning of our baptism? As it turns out, there is no one answer—because baptism has multiple layers of theological significance. Baptism is a sign that we are made God’s children, that we receive the Holy Spirit, that our sins are washed away. Any of these could be a sermon in itself, but you get a sense of the layers of meaning in this sacrament: our forgiveness, our adoptions as children of God, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

But if this is why we are baptized, then a question: why was Christ baptized? Think about it: how does any of this apply to Christ? Baptism signifies that we are adopted as children of God; why then is Christ baptized, since not only is he the Son of God—but he is also the one through whom we are adopted (Galatians 4:5, Ephesians 1:5)? Baptism signifies that we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit; why then is Christ baptized, since it is Christ, together with the Father, who gives us the Holy Spirit (John 15:26)? Baptism signifies that our sins are washed away; why then is Christ baptized, since he is not only the sinless one, but also the one through whom our sins are forgiven?

And this last tension is perhaps the most disorienting. The Gospels tell us that, in John the Baptist’s ministry, baptism was about sin and forgiveness; John came “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:2, Luke 1:3), calling out to any who would listen, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). According to John the Baptist—who, as his name implies, is really something of an expert on baptism—according to John, baptism was for sinners; why then would the one who is “without sin” come to be baptized (Hebrews 4:15)?

And indeed, as we find in our Gospel Lesson this morning, John initially balked at the prospect of baptizing Jesus, “object[ing], ‘I’m the one who needs to be baptized, not you!’ (Peterson). Matthew writes: “Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’” (v. 14). When John initially refuses Christ’s request, John’s language is quite strong: what our translation has as “would have prevented him” could be translated much more bluntly: “John was forbidding” (*διεκώλυεν*) Jesus from being baptized (Marshall).

And doesn’t John have a point? Why would the one who needs no forgiveness come to baptism like any other sinner? Jesus then responds to John. Matthew writes: “But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness [*δικαιοσύνη*.]’ Then [John] consented” (v. 15). In response to John’s objections, Jesus answers that, in his being baptized, this will “fulfill all righteousness,” using a rich word that also means “justice” and “mercy” (Trenchard). What does this mean? How does it “fulfill all righteousness”—all justice and mercy—for Jesus to be baptized?

Christ’s baptism ushers in the beginning of his ministry. Everything you know of Christ’s life and death—his teaching, his healing, his revelation of God’s love, his suffering, his dying, his rising again—all this begins with his baptism. At this moment, in the baptismal waters, Jesus begins a ministry that embodies what the

church calls “the wonderful exchange” (*mirifica commutatio*), which describes how Jesus took upon himself what is ours in order that we may receive what is his: he took upon himself our pain and our brokenness and our death in order that we could be graced by God with healing and forgiveness and eternal life.

John Calvin, a sixteenth-century Reformer (and really a forefather of the Presbyterian Church), explained it like this: “This is the wonderful exchange,” he wrote, “which, out of his measureless benevolence, [God] has made with us; [...] that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, he has conferred his immortality upon us; that, accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; [...] that, [by] taking the weight of our iniquity [...] upon himself, he has clothed us with his righteousness” (IV.17.2).

In this “wonderful exchange,” what was mortal became Christ’s and what was eternal became ours. In Christ, God took upon himself all our weakness, all our brokenness, all our fearfulness, and even all our sinfulness—in such a way that these became Christ’s to bear for us...

And here we begin to understand why Christ, the sinless one, accepted “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”: in this way, Christ identifies with us in our brokenness in order that, through this “wonderful exchange,” we may be made whole. As St. Paul wrote: “For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness (*δικαιούνη*) of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

This “wonderful exchange,” I think we’re accustomed to thinking in these terms about the cross—where Christ took upon himself our death and gave us his life; yet the “wonderful exchange” is reflected throughout Christ’s life and ministry. And it begins in the Baptism of the Lord, as Christ accepts a sinner’s baptism: in the waters of his baptism, we see the “wonderful exchange”—as Christ is baptized not for his needs but for ours. In baptism, Jesus “identifies himself” with us (Wright) “by joining [us] in the waters of the Jordan” (Hare). For our sake, the sinless one, who needs no forgiveness, is baptized for the remission of sins; for our sake, the one who brings healing is baptized like one who needs to be healed; for our sake, Jesus takes upon himself our brokenness so that, in his baptism, we may be the ones made whole.

John Calvin, who I quoted before, explained it like this: “our faith receives from baptism the [...] sure testimony to us that we are not only engrafted into the death and life of Christ, but so united to Christ that we become sharers in all his blessings. For [Christ] dedicated and sanctified baptism in his own body [Matt. 3:13] in order that he might have [this baptism] in common with us as the firmest bond of the union and fellowship which he has deigned to form with us” (IV.15.5). That is, Christ was baptized so that, in our baptism, we would find fellowship and union with Christ.

A deeply evocative hymn, written by the late theologian, preacher, and musician Thomas Troeger, explores—in a different way—John’s question and the question of this sermon: why would Christ be baptized? The hymn asks: “What king would wade through murky streams and bow beneath the wave [...]?” And the answer, just as we find in reflecting on the “wonderful exchange,” is again: that Christ was baptized so that, in the waters of baptism, we would find Christ. “Come bow beneath the flowing wave,” the hymn continues. “Christ stands here at your side.”

So once more: why was Christ baptized? For us, for you: Christ was baptized for you. Christ was baptized not for the forgiveness of his sin, but for ours; he was baptized not for his sake, but for ours. This was for you. When Christ tells John that, by submitting to baptism, he will “fulfill all righteousness”...this is not for Christ, but for us—that we might receive the righteousness, the justice, the mercy of God. Christ is baptized for us, for you.

I've had the joy of baptizing both children and adults here at New St. James, and I always address the baptizand—the one being baptized—offering these words from a French Reformed liturgy:

“for you Jesus Christ came at Bethlehem;
for you he lived and showed God’s love;
for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary
and cried at the last, ‘It is finished’;
for you he triumphed over death
and rose to newness of life;
for you he ascended to God’s right hand.
All this he did for you,
before you knew anything of it.
And so the Scripture is fulfilled:
‘We love, because God first loved us’ (1 John 4:19).”
And one could also add:
“for you, he entered into the waters of baptism.”

Baptism of the Lord Sunday offers us an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of Christ’s baptism—and the meaning of our own (Driver). And today, we find that the meaning of our baptism is found within the meaning of Christ’s baptism; we discover that our baptism is meaningful and powerful precisely because Christ was first baptized for us—as we, in our baptism, follow our Lord through the waters of his baptism.
Amen.