

Thanksgiving for Baptism
January 11, 2026
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New Testament scholar, Mark Allan Powell, notes in his commentary on this morning's text that: "there are only two texts in Matthew in which God actually speaks directly, as a character in the story (3:13-17; 17:1-9). One is read on the Baptism of Our Lord," which we're celebrating today, "the first Sunday in the Epiphany season; the other is read on the Transfiguration of Our Lord, the last Sunday in the Epiphany Season.

"These weeks we call Epiphany," he writes, "are literally framed by two divine pronouncements. What's really interesting," he notes, "is that both times that God chooses to speak aloud from heaven, God says almost exactly the same thing: Jesus is God's beloved Son and God is pleased with Jesus (3:17; 17:5)."¹

Perhaps the "wow" factor of this pronouncement is a bit lost on us because we already know this

In Advent we heard the Angel tell Joseph that Mary was to bear God's child

At Christmas Eve we heard the angels proclaim to the shepherds that the Messiah had been born

And last week we celebrated Epiphany when the Magi followed the star to see God manifest in the boy Jesus

We know!

No for nothing but we also know how this story ends, too – we know!

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/baptism-of-our-lord/commentary-on-matthew-313-17-2>

But for Jesus and for those at the shoreline that day, Jesus' baptism was a very big, very public start to his ministry and anyone that day who wondered by whose authority Jesus was setting out to heal and love the world it was made very clear

a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

There's his authority!

Stephen Fowl, President of the Episcopal seminary in Berkeley points out that "Our readings, particularly the readings from Acts and Matthew, could leave you with the impression that at his baptism, Jesus receives a really big promotion, becoming God's beloved Son, a status he did not have prior to his baptism. As easy as it might be to slip into that view, we should resist it.

"Instead," Fowl says, "Jesus' baptism serves as an announcement of what was always the case. From Matt 1:23, when he is identified as Emmanuel – God with us, continuing through his baptism, transfiguration, and ultimately, his resurrection, we are offered signs and affirmations that Jesus is, indeed, God with us. The voice from heaven and dove descending are for our benefit, not for Jesus' benefit."²

God's proclamation here is not to convince Jesus of anything he didn't already know, it is a proclamation to us to believe and trust that it is true

The scholars I read for my sermon preparation this week are not of one mind whether the baptism you and I experience is the same baptism Jesus experienced

This gets into all kinds of good theological and liturgical questions like the role of baptism in forgiving sins and the sinless-ness of Jesus or the

² <https://www.ekkleziaproject.org/lectionary/2026/1/7/crue5kgltax32b30c72yi7qifz4dbh>

symbolism of baptism representing Jesus' death and resurrection in that we are "drowned" to our sins three times and risen from the water three times like Jesus' resurrection after three days in the grave and the fact that Jesus is alive for his own baptism so how can it connect to both his life and his death

Great theological questions without simple answers

But, Mark Allan Powell and I think alike in that there is one aspect of the baptism we experience and the baptism that Jesus experienced that we have in common

"when we are baptized, we too receive the Spirit and we too are identified as beloved children of God" Dr. Powell writes

we too receive the Spirit and we too are identified as beloved children of God!

The pronouncement may not come from a booming voice in the clouds and I have yet to see a dove descend from the rafters

But in the baptismal liturgy, after being washed with the water three times – in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – the baptized are then anointed with oil and either the priest or, in Iris' case, the Bishop pronounce:

Name, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever.

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The Lutheran liturgy says: *Name* , child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.

Just as with Jesus, our baptism and this proclamation of being Christ's own for ever, is not a promotion nor does it slide us into some status we didn't previously have

Baptism is a sacrament that celebrates and honors what God knows to be true all along: you are a beloved child of God in whom God is well pleased

Now, don't hear me wrong, this doesn't make us God's son Jesus

Well, it doesn't exactly make us Jesus, but it does make us actively part of the Jesus way

Martin Luther wrote about us being little Christs to everyone we meet, for in doing so we embody our true nature as children of God

Dr. Powell puts it: "We are baptized with Christ and into Christ, so that God's plan of righteousness might be fulfilled in us and through us."

God's pronouncement at Jesus' baptism answers the question of by whose authority and in whose name did Jesus practice a ministry of radical love and inclusion? – the authority of being the son of God

the pronouncement at our baptisms answers the question by whose authority do we go out into the world seeking to bring about Jesus' ministry of radical love and inclusion? – the authority of being pronounced the children of God and inheritors of Christ's mission

In whose name do you go out into the world serving your neighbors at the Yarmouth food pantry and the St. Elizabeth's Jubilee Center and so many other places? In the name of the One who called and claimed you as a child of God in our baptism

By whose authority do you cry out for justice, seek the reconciliation of nations, and demand peace? by the authority being marked with the cross of Christ for ever

In what confidence can you persist in difficult times, with what strength can seek a better future, with whose help can you find inspiration?

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In this Epiphany season, we are starting each of our services with a Thanksgiving for Baptism which, like the baptismal liturgy itself, reminds us that we are firmly rooted in God's narrative of redemption for the world and we ask God to "bathe us in forgiveness, grace, and love. Satisfy all who thirst, and give us the life only God can give."

This liturgical moment grounds us in our truth that many of us have been washed in those waters and marked with the cross of Christ

It reminds us that every day we are girded by the power of God who loves us and claims us

It reminds us that no one can take away our integrity or our belovedness because we are God's

It reminds us that we have power and authority to be Jesus' disciples in the world

And we are leaving out the baptismal font filled with water so that if it is helpful or meaningful to you, you might dip your finger or your hand in the water and be reminded:

That you were sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever.

And God's power, God's grace, God's wisdom, God's mercy, God's love fills you, resides in you, and emanates from you

If you need a reminder of your strength, dip your finger in the water

If you need a dose of courage, dip your finger in the water

If you need to be reminded that you are so immensely loved, dip your finger in the water

Name, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever.

Amen.