

Sermon by Rev. Dean Lindsey – January 11, 2026
“Remember Your Baptism”
Matthew 3:13-17

Everybody loves a baptism. It's always a thrill for pastors, parents, and congregations to be a part of what Saint Augustine calls, “an outward sign of an inward grace,” a moment filled with blessing, publicly affirming that this person--whether an infant or adult-- is a child of God, claimed by God, loved by God.

As part of the Baptismal liturgy, pastors here pose a question about the identity of the person who is being presented. “What can we affirm about him/her?” prompting the congregation to respond, “She/He is a child of God and made in the image of God.” We print it right in the bulletin. “You are a child of God.”

This affirmation is an echo of words voiced from heaven when Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River. “This is my beloved son,” God declares, my child, whom I completely love.

In the church, we call The Baptism of Jesus an epiphany, a revelation which brings what seemed hidden into the full light of day. Maybe you've had an epiphany, a moment when you discovered something new in an instant. Love at first sight! You did not expect it, but you knew, “She's the one! Or he's the one for me.” Your epiphany could have been the moment you recognized a habit you needed to stop, a relationship that needed to end. Suddenly, you knew, it was time. Or, perhaps your epiphany brought a deeper understanding of your purpose or a fuller appreciation of God's love. Powerful experiences these are in the moment, and in the retelling.

That's why the early church tells the story of Jesus' baptism. All four of the gospels have a version of it, and we continue to tell this story. It's sudden, and dramatic, and makes clear exactly who Jesus is.

Perhaps John, the Baptizer, has an intimation of what might unfold. He hesitates, wondering why Jesus would even come to him to be baptized, to receive this ritual washing, which signifies a turn away from whatever is opposed to goodness and a turn towards the ways of God.

To be baptized indicates a readiness to be embraced by God and to embrace the ways of God. Parents present their children to be baptized in the hope that they will know the love of God and learn how to offer that love to others and be able to love themselves fully, as well.

The Baptismal ceremony is a time for celebration, but make no mistake, it a serious undertaking. The Apostle Paul describes it as dying to the corrupting values of the world and the selfish desires that reside within us. Paul writes, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so too we might walk in newness of life.” As we die to the things that separate us from God, bring us into conflict with neighbors, and alienate us from the heart of our own identity, there is the assurance of new life.

A new life in which we become fully ourselves knowing who we are, and to whom we belong. We need the community to help us know these things. That's why the congregations makes a commitment to the one who is baptized, "We look forward to sitting with him/her at the Lord's Table, sharing with them the costs and joys of discipleship, learning and growing with him in the Christian pilgrimage." You have made covenant this many times, and you will honor that covenant as you live out your faith, include the one who was baptized in the work of the church, as you teach and give encouragement him, and at times perhaps even offer correction (gently, gently I am sure).

When I was growing up in the city of New Orleans, I had the blessing and perhaps the burden of living very close to the church. In my neighborhood, there was a group of boys who were always looking for mischief. One day, they had the bright idea to fill up some water balloons and throw them at the streetcars that pass down the street between the church and our homes. That would, perhaps, be a harmless prank, but the antiquated streetcars in my hometown (tourists love to ride on them) do not have air conditioning, and the windows are almost always open, except in the coldest days of winter.

After they launched a barrage at the first streetcar that came down the tracks, I noticed that people were getting wet. And they started yelling. It didn't seem like such a bright idea to throw my balloon, so I dropped it on the sidewalk and ran home. The other boys kept at their game for a while until they threw all of their balloons.

The next day was Sunday, and when I arrived at the church, the custodian greeted me. He was not smiling.

"Dean Lindsey, do you know where I was yesterday afternoon?"

I shook my head, "no."

"I was sweeping the walk along the front of the church."

"Oh."

"And while I was sweeping the walk, do you know what I saw?"

I had a good idea what he had seen, but I didn't want to admit it. "No," I feigned ignorance.

He continued. "I saw a young member of this church throwing rocks at the streetcar."

"They weren't rocks," I protested, "they were water balloons."

After I had said that my further protest of my innocence only seemed to put me in a deeper hole. The custodian muttered on, "a member of this congregation throwing rocks."

By that point, I just hoped that he wouldn't tell the pastor, or my parents, or the whole church, for that matter.

I had been seen. I had been identified. For the moment, I may have forgotten who I was, but he was going to help me remember.

Living into our baptism might get us out of some trouble. Then again, it might get us into trouble, traveling a road that some may find hard to understand, that others may try to keep us from traveling at all.

Several years ago, I attended a talk given by William Willamon who once served as the dean of the chapel at Duke University. He described a conversation at a graduation party with the father of one of his students. Seeing the man standing alone, Willimon moved toward him to and calling out, "I'm sure you are proud of your daughter." The young lady, you see, was preparing to go and work among the poor in Africa following graduation.

"No, I'm not," growled the man, refusing even to shake the pastor's hand.

Taken aback, Willamon gave the man a moment to explain.

"My daughter came to Duke and studied hard," he said. "She's graduating with honors, after all, and she was all set to become a finance major and work for a big Wall Street firm. But every time she came to the chapel here, you filled her head with all of these unrealistic, do-gooder ideas and now she's heading off to Africa to serve Jesus. And it's all your fault!"

"It's not my fault," Willamon countered. I must say, there was some quick thinking on his part, for he asked right away, "Did you have your daughter baptized?"

"Yes." The man said.

"Did you ever take her to Sunday school or church along the way?"

Again, the man nodded "Yes, quite often."

"Then it's all your fault. You introduced your daughter to Jesus, not me."

"But, I didn't want this to happen to her," the man sputtered.

"I can see that," Willamon said. "The problem is that you expected your daughter just to become an acquaintance of Jesus. You should have explained to her when you were taking her to church that you didn't want her to become his follower."

Living into our baptismal identity can be a dangerous thing. Immediately following his own baptism, Jesus is thrust into the wilderness, and while fasting and praying, he faces a test of his faithfulness to God and to himself. Having resisted temptation, he begins his ministry of

teaching and healing, bringing out the best in some around him, but the worst, the very worst in others.

I'm certain that all of you have seen and heard the news out of Minneapolis this week. I have friends there who are heart-sick, and each, in their own way is trying to bring healing to a community that is in pain. One is a good friend who owns an independent bookstore that gathers a cross-section of the community, including Somali neighbors, accomplished professional people who love to read, and buy books from her store, but who now are living in fear. On social media, my friend been sharing encouragement for her neighbors and giving an on-the-ground witness to how her community is living through these days. On Friday evening, she opened her store for neighbors to come and make protest signs for a planned event the following morning. My friend Beth is living out her baptismal calling. I can say this because I know her well. She wants people to know the truth, and she helps them find it. She cares about the people in her community, and tries to protect them. She prays for peace.

There is, or was, another woman in Minneapolis whom I do not know, a bit younger than my friend, named Renee Nicole Good, a mother of three children. We know about her, sadly, because she was shot by a federal agent. She has variously been described by neighbors and family members as a kind person, "extremely compassionate," "non-confrontational," "an amazing person." These are quotes from a CNN article. Her former husband said she was a devoted Christian, and that should mean something to us all.

Because it's possible that her identity in Christ is what brought her to that tragic time and place and what happened in a brief moment which will, no doubt continue to be disputed and litigated for a long time. But, I think it's safe to say that she did not head there in order to hurt someone. I hope and assume that the officer who shot at her did not arrive with that intention, either, and we need to pray for his soul, because taking another life is a fearsome thing.

It seems clear that Renee Good showed up because she knew her neighbors were in distress, and she wanted to help them, somehow to bring them help. That is sacred work, to protect the weak, and advocate for the vulnerable. That is the kind of work that we are authorized and commissioned to do by virtue of our baptism.

"You are my beloved child." When we hear those words, we know they don't just apply to us. It's not all about me. It's about everyone. We are all God's children, precious and loved. Let's treat each other that way.