

**The Baptism of Our Lord, Sunday, January 11, AD 2026**

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminster, Massachusetts

**Jesus in the Water**

Matthew 3:13–17

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Eph 1:2*


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The text for today are the words of Jesus from St. Matthew's Gospel: **"Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness"** (Matt 3:15).

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These first words of Jesus in St. Matthew's Gospel have to do with His baptism, and His last words—the well-known Great Commission in Matthew 28—have to do with yours. What this means is that His public ministry begins and ends with baptism. The very structure of the Gospel of Matthew shows that baptism is central both to Jesus' own life on earth and to His body, the Church. It has to do not only with the command of Jesus but also with His person. It's intimately connected to who He is and what He does in His incarnation. Jesus is the eternal Word of God. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. He came—as we heard today—**"to the Jordan [River] to John, to be baptized by him"** (Matt 3:13). And there you have it: Jesus, the Word, personally in the water to save sinners.

BAPTISM IS WHAT IT IS AND DOES WHAT IT DOES  
BECAUSE JESUS IS IN THE WATER.

I.

Jesus is in the water, or at least about to get in, but John the Baptist doesn't think that He belongs there. **"John would have prevented [Jesus from being baptized], saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'"** (Matt 3:14). If John had his way, Jesus would stay out of the water entirely. Not even dip a toe in. Why? The water was a place for sinners. It's as if a sign hung beside the baptismal water which said "Only sinners allowed in." John made that clear in how he administered baptism. For when the people came out to him, **"they were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins"** (Matt 3:6). Theirs was a baptism of repentance. But John knows that Jesus isn't a sinner and personally has no need for repentance, so He obviously doesn't belong in the water. Makes sense. You can almost hear John's shock and surprise at the idea of it: "Don't bother with the water, Jesus. Surely you've got better things to do! Shouldn't you be out saving the world?" And the reply of our Lord: "Why, that's

exactly what I'm doing here!" John recognizes, rightly, I should add, his own need to be baptized into Jesus, but he can't quite get his mind around Jesus in the water. And yet that's the very first thing Jesus wants to do. It's what He insists on doing.

But John isn't the only one to keep Jesus out of the water. Sometimes I run across web sites from other churches that explain their beliefs about baptism, and many of them basically do the same thing. They keep Jesus out of the water. It's not that they deny our Lord's baptism—they don't—yet the way they speak of baptism makes it all about you and not so much about Jesus. For example, here's how one church puts it:

By accepting Jesus as Savior, you have received the free gift of salvation available only through Christ. . . . You have concluded that Jesus' Christ's death on cross . . . is the only thing that can bridge the gap between you and God [*now they're right about that, of course*]. Baptism does not provide salvation. . . . It is an act of obedience . . . and is a testimony of your decision. . . . We view baptism as an important step in your life as a follower of Jesus. . . . Baptism is an outward expression of following Christ.<sup>1</sup>

What matters in their view of baptism is what you do. Notice the language: accept, conclude, obey, decide, step, outward expression, follow. It's not about what Jesus does. And therefore, while they have baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, they end up robbing that baptism of all its power, its benefits, and its gifts, because they rob it of Jesus. Take Jesus out of the baptismal water like that and all that's left is what you bring into it. In that case, baptism's only as good as your commitment.

Others may miss the point of baptism, and yet we, too, in our own way would keep Jesus out of the water. What do I mean? No, we don't deny the benefits of baptism. But do we not sometimes deny our sin, ignore it, or make excuses for it? Isn't it the case that we try to handle sin on our own, rather than let Jesus deal with it? And haven't we each held on to some sins, frequently returned to them, and too easily given in to them? It's as if we were to tell Jesus, "No need to be in the water with me. This sin of mine isn't that big of a deal. I've got it under control or I will soon. Anyway, I'll take care of it myself, thank you very much."

## II.

We may try to keep Jesus out of the water, but He's not so easily turned aside. "**Jesus answered [John], 'Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he consented**" (Mat 3:15). No matter what John says, no matter how strongly a church denies the benefits of baptism, no matter how weakly we

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Community Church, Greenwood, Indiana. "Baptism," <http://www.egreenwood.org/about/baptism/> (accessed 12/27/2013 1:30 pm).

struggle with sin, Jesus gets in the water. He gets all the way in. He gets all the way in the water with sinners and their sins. He gets in the water to take sin away from the sinner forever. To wrestle it away. To put it to death, if He must. Yes, right here at the beginning of His ministry, to the great surprise and alarm of everyone, Jesus gets in the water and thereby identifies Himself as the sinner. By this act, He confesses all sin as His, including yours. He claims it. He owns it. And not just the sin, but also the guilt, the condemnation, the death and hell that come with it. Because the Word is in the water, He removes our sin from us, works forgiveness and rescues from death and the devil. As St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, **“For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God”** (2 Cor 5:21).

The righteousness of Jesus isn't just His obedience to the law. Rather, it's the plan of salvation that God accomplishes in and through Jesus. It's His innocent suffering, His bleeding, His dying on the cross. For us and for our salvation, He was baptized into death. He gets in the water to take our sin and He gets out of the water to die with and to that sin. The body of sin hangs on the cross and is buried in the tomb. And yet, when the body rises on the third day, the sin is left behind and a new man emerges. **“For the death He died He died to sin, once for all, but the life He lives He lives to God”** (Rom 6:10). Baptism, Jesus, death, and resurrection all hang together.

**“And when Jesus was baptized, immediately He went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to Him and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on Him, and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’”** (Matt 3:16–17). Because Jesus is in the water, the Holy Spirit descends there and the Father's voice is over the waters. The entire Holy Trinity is present and active. And so also in the baptism that Jesus gives to His disciples at the end of His public ministry. They are to baptize all nations **“in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”** (Matt 28:19). That means that Jesus was also there in the water of your baptism, that the Spirit descended on you as well, and that you, too, are beloved by the Father. As St. Paul wrote, **“He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption”** (1 Cor 1:30).

St. Paul unpacks the meaning of baptism in his letter to the Romans, which is today's Epistle reading: **“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized in Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His”** (Rom 6:2–5). And this is the result of your baptism: **“So you also must consider**

**yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus”** (Rom 6:11). All because Jesus is in the water and by His baptism in the Jordan He “sanctified and instituted all waters to be a blessed flood and a lavish washing away of sin.”

Therefore, dear Christian, you can never value your baptism too highly, for the Lord Himself has honored baptism by undergoing it. And He has made your baptism into a daily death and resurrection in which sin is put off and He is put on. Strive, then, to walk in this newness of life in the Son by the Spirit to the Father as a foretaste of the life of the world to come.

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The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

*Phil 4:7*

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*Revised from a sermon preached on Sunday, January 12, AD 2014,  
at St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana.*