

St James United Church



Message for January 11, 2026 Baptism of Jesus (First Sunday after Epiphany)

Chosen to Be a Blessing” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17 and Illia Delio, *The Hours of the Universe* (Orbis Books, 2021), 41-42 and 43

There’s something special about this Sunday. It feels connected to Christmas even though decorations are taken down. Jesus’ baptism is one of the stories that comprise Epiphany in the Orthodox tradition, along with the miracle at the wedding in Cana as we sang. It offers a chance to keep reflecting on the significance of the incarnation, God drawing near us in Jesus, God entering into our experience, all of it, revealing it as a gift, a blessing, as divine, holy.

In this I appreciate how the gospel reading starts simply with “Jesus came from Galilee.” On one level it is logistical: he needed to have a starting point. But on a deeper level it places his life into a context. It evokes feelings of place, experience, culture, tradition. Imagine if it read “He came from Trinity Bay.” That tells you something about him, different than “He came from town,” even if in each story he travelled to, say, Cupids. It tells you about his world, family ties, what he does for work, for fun. Because we believe that Jesus is Emmanuel, “God with us,” it means those family ties, that work and fun, that world are infused with, and experienced by, God. Think about that. Those family ties, that work and fun, that world are infused with, and experienced by, God.

It’s profound, isn’t it. And yet God’s blessing is not just about who we are with those who know us best, as important as that is. Jesus goes to see John as he welcomes people into the water of the Jordan, or as I’m presenting it perhaps in the cove at Cupids. We normally think of what John is doing through an individual perspective. That is our culture talking, especially with faith very much about personal holiness. So, John is performing a ritual of repentance, inviting people to leave behind the actions and attitudes that are hurtful to them and others and take on a new heart and mind. Jesus choosing to be immersed in the waters with others is his accepting the fullness of human experience, including how we so easily lose our way, get caught up in worldly patterns that are not as God calls us. Him doing so doesn’t bless those patterns but points to how God is with us as we struggle with them, especially as we realize we need to break free of those patterns and start to live with greater compassion and care for one another.

But the culture Jesus was raised in was less individually focused than ours, more communal. Given this, the location where John baptized was significant. He was taking the people back to their founding, to the hopes they felt as they crossed the Jordan, God completing their journey out of enslavement in Egypt, to live differently than a society that saw no issue with oppressing others for their labour. As they lived under Roman occupation, like a new Egypt, John invited them to reclaim that earlier vision, the identity they shared as God’s people, called to live a more

compassionate and just way together. A John in our context would invite those who came to see him to reclaim the hopes they had in our province's founding and the cooperation that defines us.

Reclaiming their shared identity would be an empowering experience, especially as they jointly resisted the pull of the Roman system and the perks that came with cooption by it. Shared identity can be a gift. It also begs us to be cautious. It's easy to get caught in tribalism, convinced we're above others - baymen blessed but not townies, Newfoundlanders chosen but not come-from-aways. We see this at play right now: in Israel's bombardment of Gaza and settler violence in the West Bank, Russia's war with Ukraine and most notably US expansionism as threats are made against Colombia, Mexico, Greenland following the strike against Venezuela. It's premised on a sense not just of superiority but of God blessing them for this, in each case faith leaders going along with it. Nationalism can be a powerful drug, giving you a sense of belonging as you side with your group and vilify others. Opposition becomes a personal threat, and not to let the ICE agent off the hook, but it may explain why he killed a protestor when the video suggests she wasn't trying to hurt him. You see how dangerous ideology can be. God's chosenness isn't about being superior but is a call to reveal to others the gift and blessing of living God's way. Culture, experience can be a blessing, but they need to be challenged too. We live up to chosenness by seeking a more just and compassionate world.

We see this in Jesus' baptism. As he emerges from the water, he has a profound experience of being chosen, called God's beloved son. He immediately goes into the wilderness where he tries to understand what it means, confronts the devil who wants him to see it as superiority, about power, expansion. He instead his life affirms the words we heard in Isaiah 42 where the servant of God cares for the vulnerable, frees the imprisoned, seeks justice, looks to a world where we take to heart the care and support of others, all others, not just our group. Jesus did extended compassion and challenged those who withheld it and calls his followers to do the same as in baptism we take on his identity, like him named by God as beloved daughters, sons, children.

Christianity affirms that this identity as God's beloved is larger than where we come from, than our tribe or nation, is supposed to be larger than religion too. We can forget that, make belief in Jesus necessary for God's blessing, missing the point of the season we celebrated. In the incarnation, every culture and people, every family, community and faith tradition can be a holy encounter, because God chooses to be with us, makes us one holy people, as Illia Delio reminds us, Christians and non-Christians both part of Christ's body. It was never to be about allegiance but love, as we take to heart the responsibility to care for others, for the earth, build up the world, not tear it apart, doing so because we're family.

That is what the teaching of the incarnation is all about. God embraces us in Jesus, not born to free us from sin but to free us to see who we really are, to see our lives a gift in God, our culture, all cultures, a blessing. This awareness calls us to see everyone as sibling and so to care for one another, even risk our lives for each other. Again, this is what Jesus did, his way of compassion and justice costing his life. Yet he is alive in us as his beloved. May we be his beloved and so continue to not only be blessed but be a blessing in his name. Amen.