

Sermon for the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, Year A
11 January 2026, St. Luke/San Lucas Episcopal Church
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Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17; Psalm 29

Be near us, O God, we pray. Be near to all who mourn. Hold our grieving world in your heart. Open our eyes, our ears, our minds, to your truth. Amen.¹

Welcome to the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord. Officially, it is a day of holy celebration, yet it comes at a difficult time for our country, for our world. Invasions, toppling of governments, killing of mothers, shooting of people outside hospitals. All this in the last week. It's hard to celebrate, to feel joyous. And I'd like to say out loud, that's okay. To acknowledge this disconnect between what the calendar says and what our world brings to us.

Today, rather than immediately focus in on our nearly two thousand years of church tradition around baptism, on rituals and sacraments and vows, I'd like to take a few minutes to go back to Jesus' baptism, a Jewish rite that took place in the first century, in a country under Roman occupation, a place where horrific, unfair events were taking place on a regular basis.

As Father Alfredo outlined in his sermon recently, John the Baptizer was a Jewish prophet, a courageous individual who, in the face of the injustices of his time, of his world, spoke up. He spoke up and spoke out, not to the Roman rulers, to powers in faraway places, but rather, he spoke to his own people—reminding them of God's promises to them, reminding them of their promises to God, reminding them of their obligations to each other.

Father Alfredo reminded us that John called on his people to repent, to change direction, to reorient their actions, to follow the path God laid out for them, regardless of, in spite of, in the face of, what the earthly powers were doing.

And Jesus responded to that call. Now, we don't know what Jesus had been doing with his life up to this point. Scripture gives us the birth narrative, one short episode from a visit to the temple when Jesus was about 12, and then nothing. From about 12 to about 30, a period of 18 or so years, we have no information on what Jesus was doing, how he was living, what he was saying.

What we do know is that, at around 30 years of age, Jesus entered the desert around the Jordan river, that he listened to the words of his cousin John, and that, on one particular day, as John was calling on listeners to repent, to reorient their lives, Jesus stepped forward, he stepped forward and asked John to include him in the Jewish ritual of tevilah, what we refer to as baptism.

¹ Adapted from Prayers of the People by The Work of Imagination's Good Friday liturgy, in response to this week's tragedy in Minneapolis. www.illustratedministry.com

The Christian sacrament of baptism draws its inspiration from this ancient Jewish ritual and, while there are many similarities between the two, there are also some important differences.

Tevilah is a truly ancient practice. It is referenced in some of the oldest Hebrew writings, in Leviticus, where specific instructions are given. However, scholars believe that the practice predates these writings; this was just when written works appeared. Archeological sites indicate that the Hebrew people had been practicing tevilah or similar rituals for some time.

And in Jewish practice, both ancient and modern, tevilah is not necessarily a one-time event as it has become in Christian practice. Rather, tevilah can happen at various times in a person's life. For example, priests and religious leaders undergo tevilah, a ritual cleansing, before entering the temple or engaging in certain practices, practices design to bring them closer to God.

Individuals who have given birth spend some time away from their normal practices, an ancient form of maternity leave. They undergo tevilah before rejoining the community, before again taking up their responsibilities in the family, in the community, in the world.

And tevilah is also done when individuals repent, when they change the course of their lives, when they reorient themselves into a new direction, in order to more closely align their path with the one God has designed for them.

These may seem very different, but they do have something in common. In all these cases, the tevilah, the baptism, the ritual cleansing, is part of a bigger story. It is not an objective in and of itself, but rather, is one step in a larger plan. Tevilah prepares the person for something, for rejoining community, for reorienting their actions, for taking a step closer to God.

Jesus' baptism, his tevilah with John, comes as Jesus is reorienting his activities, as he is taking up his ministry, as he is publicly acknowledging his place as God's beloved Son.

And Jesus' life took a different path following his tevilah. He began teaching and preaching and healing. He began gathering followers and inspiring change. He began performing miracles. He began speaking out, publicly and loudly, not just to his own people, not just to his Jewish community, but to all people, calling on us all to repent, to turn from our wicked, selfish ways, to follow the path God has laid out for us, that God designed for us humans, to live in community, to love each other and to walk closely with, to love and be loved by, God.

Following this public announcement, Jesus acted—and people noticed. The people around Jesus saw him in a new way following his baptism, his tevilah. They could see the difference as he reoriented his path, as the heavens opened to him, as the Ruach

Hakodesh, the Holy Spirit, descended upon him, as he embraced his ministry and publicly acknowledged his role as the Beloved Son of God.

The people around Jesus noticed. They began following him. They shared stories of their experiences, of Jesus' words, with each other, with friends, with anyone who would listen. They wrote them down.

These actions, these words, were so impactful that today, nearly two thousand years later, we are still reading them, studying them, gaining insight, inspiration, comfort from them.

And that brings us to today, to our remembrance of Jesus' baptism, his tevilah, the moment he publicly embraced his role in the world and began the openly carrying out his ministry.

At our ten o'clock service, we will have a baptism. We will recall our baptismal vows. We will have an opportunity to recommit ourselves to the path we (or, in some cases our parents) set us upon at our own baptism.

The words of the baptismal covenant are beautiful. Each step of the ritual—the blessing of the water, the promises made by and for the person being baptized, the welcoming and support of the community—each and every step is infused with purpose.

But this only has meaning as a step in a larger process. Our baptism, our vows and rituals and sacraments, are only as valuable as we make them. They only have worth if we live them, if we follow the example of Jesus and embrace our calling.

If we renounce evil in all its forms—greed, violence, murder, callous treatment of other, dishonesty, disrespect, neglect—all its forms.

If we accept Jesus as Savior, putting our whole trust in God's grace and love.

If we not just promise, but put into action, our following and our obeying of our Lord.

If we share this Good News, each day, to each person, not just by word but also by example.

If we strive for justice and peace, in the midst of this broken and unforgiving world.

If we respect, truly respect, the dignity of every human being. Those we love. Those we admire. Those who agree with us. Those we dislike. Those we disagree with. Those who seek to do us harm.

If we do this, if we even try to do this, God will help. Our lives will be changed. Our actions will change. And people will notice.

That is the question, the challenge I leave us all with today, did our baptism stop at the ritual, did our vows end when the service was over, or will we leave this place changed, reinvigorated, with our promises renewed. So changed, so energized, so renewed, that people looking at us will see these differences, will see them and know that we, also, are beloved children of God, put upon this earth to share that good news, that love, with others, even in the midst of all the pain and brokenness we see today.

Amen.