

**Trinity Church in the City of Boston**  
January 8, 2023  
The Rev. Morgan S. Allen  
*The Baptism of Jesus, Matthew 3:13-17*

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us. *Amen.*

Today we mark “The Baptism of Jesus”<sup>i</sup> in the Church calendar and, once more, we recount our part in the salvation story. By song and scripture,<sup>ii</sup> “by water and the Holy Spirit,”<sup>iii</sup> we set ourselves in those primal rites of the first believers, in the baptistries of ancient cathedrals, and even unto Trinity’s Broadstep. *All of us*, sharing in the living Christ’s baptism, celebrate our life in that Love too great for time to hold.

*We live in the time of Herod Antipas*, and for almost a week we have camped at the Jordan. The spectacle we heard described drew us, yes, but not the spectacle only; something *else* moved our feet: a feeling, an awareness. Having labored such long hours for so long, these rhythmless days on the edge of town have felt beyond time – a sort of forever, yet passing in a breath.

The baptizer – wearing his camel’s hair and eating his bugs – seems to have sprouted here with no more warning or place than a wild weed.<sup>iv</sup> Keeping our distance, we have listened to his teachings. We have seen him welcome our neighbors, some with shouts and others with whispers. He leads them into the river, under its surface, and then back up again, gasping, blinking, grinning. Some leave bewildered, but among us who stay, we wonder what John *means* – not only the sense of his words, but the consequence of his being, the fact of him.<sup>v</sup>

And then this *other* arrives, introducing himself as Jesus.<sup>vi</sup> The way John receives him is different – and immediately so. Instinctively, we turn our heads, stand from our crouches, move closer to the river, close enough that its muddy banks squeeze between our toes. John’s whole person seems to have altered since morning; his shoulders have sturdied like those of a king, and yet he submits himself to this stranger as a servant.

“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” we hear him ask.<sup>vii</sup>

The stranger reassures him,<sup>viii</sup> and they move into the water together – close to one another, like brothers, like lovers. Jesus closes his eyes, lowers his chin, and lays his arms across his chest. John holds the Galilean’s head and sweeps Jesus from his feet, gently, but swiftly, as in a dance. The stranger vanishes into the river. The whole cosmos hushes.

Jesus splashes back into our world. The sun shines. The wind blows.<sup>ix</sup> More than a voice speaks – though that may well be, too – a realization overwhelms us, like the heavy flood of

dread or joy, an assurance deeper than bone: “This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”<sup>x</sup> And it begins.

*We live among the first generations after Jesus’ Resurrection.* For almost three years we have served as the *ecclesia’s* probationers, a season of training that has intensified during the last weeks of Lent. We have just spent all night with our Christian community and with members of the *catechumenate*, those fellow candidates for Holy Baptism with whom we have shared prayer and instruction.<sup>xi</sup>

Well before the first light of Easter, we process to the creekside and leave all our clothing and adornment at its edge. In the darkness, we hear only the gentle current and the steady breath of our friends. Entering the water, we face West, and “renounce Satan, his works and his pomp.”<sup>xii</sup>

The presbyter then turns us East, and we receive three questions “corresponding with the three sections of what will become the Apostle’s Creed: ‘Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty . . . In Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord? . . . In the Holy Spirit, the Church, and the life everlasting?’ After each reply of ‘I believe,’ we are immersed and baptized in the name of the same.”<sup>xiii</sup> Members of the church then lead us into “the eucharistic assembly, where, for the first time, we share in the kiss of peace and the people’s prayers, we make our offerings of bread and wine, and we receive the Body and Blood of Christ.”<sup>xiv</sup>

*We live in the time of Augustine,* and, during the last three hundred years, Constantine has declared Christianity the religion of the State, moving Christians from the shadows of their private piety into the glare of public life. To become part of this *new* Catechumenate, we presented ourselves to a presbyter for the exorcism of evil spirits, wringing the pagan out of us.<sup>xv</sup> Like our forebearers, we then dedicated a substantial season of preparation to ready ourselves for full membership in the Church.

All around us the Empire has commissioned, designed, and built structures explicitly purposed for Christian worship. The largest of these temples include a baptistry, a room used only once a year for the performance of Holy Baptism.<sup>xvi</sup> With a teeming cohort of fellow candidates, we enter one of these sanctuaries and stand on a landing above an elaborate pool.

By three steps – symbolizing Jesus’ three days in the tomb – we descend into the water, and members of the church lead us further into the pool. Tiles glitter beneath the water’s shivering surface, mosaics recounting the stories of the Passover and the Red Sea’s parting, of Jesus’ baptism and his walking on the waves. A priest baptizes us in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. We step out of the pool – again by three steps, each one reverberating with Jesus’ rise from the dead – and parishioners vest us in a simple, white gown. A bishop seals us with oil, making the sign of the cross on our foreheads, and we enter the Eucharistic room.<sup>xvii</sup>



*We live during these harried days*, and we did not immediately hear the alarm over the sleepy hum of the nursery's humidifier. Now we rush about the house, frantically searching for the little stockings. The baby cries in her highchair. Covered in warmed rice cereal, she throws her milk and pouts her lower lip in a huff of protest. Picking up the bottle, we find the leggings right where we had left them after work the night before: in a CVS bag behind the living-room chair.

Combing the cereal out of her hair, we dress the child in the same white gown her great-grandmother wore on the day of her baptism more than one hundred years before. In a voice slow and heavy and not ours alone, we tell our daughter about this tradition, about how she is part of a Love too great for time to hold. Fitting each patent-leather shoe on her tiny feet, we recount how *we* had worn the same gown on *our* baptismal day, an occasion we cannot remember, of course, but one that has been remembered *to* us. With a kiss on her forehead, we give her a smile, and she returns us the same. We text in a blur, coordinating one more time with the Godparents before we set off for church.

And the heavens open ... blessing us with easy parking along Clarendon Street. As we lift the babe and her car seat from its cradle, our college roommate and their partner give a shout and hustle toward us. With hugs and coos, we make our way to seats in the first pews. Our early-arriving, eager family greets us there. The choir finishes its rehearsal, and the lights and notes of Copley Square spill into the center aisle with the processional cross.

When the presider calls us forward, we stand around the baptismal font, a hulking stone dish in an iron frame. As we had practiced the day before, we and our lifelong friends make promises on behalf of the sleeping child, until she is "sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever."<sup>xviii</sup>

"The light of Christ," the baptizer declares.

"Thanks be to God," we and the whole congregation sing in reply.<sup>xix</sup>

We exchange The Peace to applause and words of welcome, and we return to our pews. Pulling the child close to us, our hearts beat into one another. We hold back the overwhelm rising inside us and settling on the back of our eyes. We become aware that an energy has moved, something cosmic has shifted into a new position ... it is uncertain and dangerous, hopeful and the holy, and it's got hold of us and all we love ... this force at once beautiful and hard and good.

See, *these are the stories* in which God has fashioned us as an essential part. These are the moments and these are the lives to which God has bound us, *all of us*, the cooing child and loving mother, the desperate neighbor and sincere stranger, the baptizer and baptized ... made members of one another before time itself and *for ever*.

With gladness and singleness of heart,

*Amen.*

<sup>i</sup> Or “Baptism of Our Lord,” set for the first Sunday after The Epiphany.

<sup>ii</sup> “Manifest at Jordan’s stream, Prophet, Priest, and King supreme ... Anthems be to Thee addressed, God in man made manifest.” From “Songs of thankfulness and praise,” our closer today (#135 in *The Hymnal, 1982*).

<sup>iii</sup> From the prayer over the candidates in “Holy Baptism,” *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), pp. 307-308.

<sup>iv</sup> Matthew 3:1,4.

<sup>v</sup> Matthew 3:5-12.

<sup>vi</sup> Matthew 3:13.

<sup>vii</sup> Matthew 3:14.

<sup>viii</sup> Matthew 3:15.

<sup>ix</sup> Matthew 3:16.

<sup>x</sup> Matthew 3:17.

<sup>xi</sup> Stevick, Daniel B. *Baptismal Moments; Baptismal Meanings*. The Church Hymnal Corporation, New York, New York, 1997. I draw the details and quotations of these two historical sections from Stevick. As such influences sometimes happen, a professor retired while I was in seminary, and he gave away his library. I remember the books piled on tables in a common area of the campus. This hardback volume (a conspicuous green) caught my eye, and I’ve long been glad it did. For most of the last 20 years, I’ve drawn on its perspectives during baptismal preparation sessions with candidates and sponsors, parents and godparents.

<sup>xii</sup> Stevick, p.9.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xv</sup> Stevick, p. 10.

<sup>xvi</sup> Stevick, p. 9.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xviii</sup> From the Chrismation in “Holy Baptism,” *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), p. 308.

<sup>xix</sup> Spoken when presenting a baptismal candle, lit from the Paschal Candle, according to the “Additional Directions,” of “Holy Baptism,” p. 312.