

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after The Epiphany:

The Baptism of Christ

A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger

on January 11, 2026

Isaiah 42:1-9 / Acts 10:34-43 / Psalm 29 / Matthew 3:13-17

*Through Your word, O Lord, give strength to Your people;  
Give Your people the blessing of peace.*

As we commemorate the Baptism of Christ today, we sort of take a step back from the drama of the Birth Narrative. Back in December, one of the Sunday Gospel Readings was the paragraph before this one in which John the Baptist builds the drama of the Coming of the Messiah:

*I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*

Now *that's* drama! But what *really* happened in the very next paragraph was quite a bit less drama. Jesus comes to *John* to be baptized, Jesus, one who doesn't need to repent goes to the one whose Baptism is one of repentance. And there is no unquenchable fire.

Jesus' Baptism paves the way for His ministry. It is not a coincidence that the ordination rite invokes the Holy Spirit to come down on the person, as the Holy Spirit does in the Baptism, as words of commissioning are said by the Bishop, similar to the voice of God from the Heavens at Jesus' Baptism. This invoking of a commission happens not only at the ordinations of Bishops, priests and deacons, but also at a person's Confirmation, which is the sealing of one's Baptism.

Many assert that Baptism and Confirmation are the beginnings of one's ministry. And while ministry can and should happen at any time, these rites are about new birth within the Body of Christ, so carry with them a strong sense of going forth to do Christ's work. However, far too often, Baptism and Confirmation have become "*graduation from church*", particularly among teenagers, from my generation onward.

But there is an Epiphany in Baptism. There exists the possibility to see the image and work of Christ in Baptism. The outward and visible sign that is the water is only seen at the Baptism itself. So, we must look for the manifestation or the epiphany of the inward and spiritual grace of Baptism, which is:

*union with Christ in His Death and Resurrection, Birth into God's family the Church, forgiveness of sins, and new life in the Holy Spirit.*

The Epiphany in Jesus' Baptism was His chosen-ness and oneness with God the Creator. We get to see that in writing in the Gospels. But what is the Epiphany in the everyday Christian's Baptism?

Let's start with a case study of universal baptism. Here, pretty much every person who is baptized has a connection with a parish church, and the request for Baptism makes sense. In the Church of England, everyone has the right – by law – to be Baptized in their parish church, regardless of their churchgoing or even their religion. So, in my first parish, there were probably around 30 Baptisms in the time that I was there, and probably no more than 2 or 3 of them were members of the congregation or known to anyone in the congregation.

This is not a criticism of the system or of parents who have their children baptized or of the clergy who baptize non-churchgoers. Peter tells us in our reading from Acts that *God shows no partiality*, no preferential treatment between Jew and Gentile:

*Anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him.*

So, I get it. Let them take the first step, and let's see where it goes. And it is *because* of my time in the Church of England that I came to realize that, if someone wants God in their lives, even just a little, it is my job to help that happen. And depending on how they want God in their lives, we'll figure out what works best. Most often, that is Baptisms, Weddings and Funerals.

I always meet with parents prior to a Baptism to make sure that they understand what Christian Baptism is, to answer any questions they have about Baptism – both the ceremony and the sacrament – and to ascertain what Baptism is to them. So, I always ask, whether they are churchgoers or not, “*Why do you want your baby to be baptized?*” And if they are not churchgoers, I tack that onto the end of my question. With almost universal similarity, the parents who don't go to church respond:

*We want our child to have a choice of religions as s/he grows up. We think that is important. We want them to be able to understand the different religions and make their own choice when they are older, and this is the beginning of that.*

... Ummm ... OK. In conversation with other clergy, we struggled to fully understand what they meant by that.

How, then, are we different ... what is distinctive about being baptized? How do we dare publicly identify as Christians in this era of White Christian Nationalism? How do we manifest Christ when the label “Christian” has such a negative meaning to so many? And what makes us different than a ‘good person’ who doesn't profess a faith?

These are questions and reflections that are not limited to the rhetoric of the person standing behind the pulpit. These are questions and reflections that everyday Christians wrestle with. These are questions and reflections that you

may have struggled with at some point. What is the Epiphany in Baptism? How is the inward and spiritual grace of Baptism manifested in your everyday life?

Let me tell you the stories of 2 people whose Baptisms were manifested in their daily life and work.

The homeless and the hungry have been part of the San Luis Obispo community for decades. It's not a new phenomenon. When I arrived at St Stephen's in 2016, there was a small shelter for those seeking permanent housing that wasn't nearly big enough to house everyone. As a result, 12 faith communities would each open their doors for a month to house the overflow. For those residents and those who were unhoused, a small facility on Prado Road provided food and limited wrap-around services. Those opportunities for SLO's most marginalized did not appear out of thin air, nor were they a local government initiative.

One of the people very involved in searching for solutions to the overnight housing capacity was Dick Warren, a member of St Stephen's. Out of his Christian commitment to the poorest of God's children, Dick worked for years to gather people from the faith communities of SLO to form the Interfaith Council for the Homeless ... back in 1991. Through his leadership, the then-recently-founded People's Kitchen and the Interfaith Council worked with and lobbied the City Council and the County Board of Supervisors to help create the Maxine Lewis Homeless Shelter and the first site to serve the homeless on Prado Road. This required recruiting and organizing volunteers and, of course, fundraising.

Dick's friends and colleagues often thought he was delusional because there was so little money, lots of resistance, and of course, this had never been done before. But through his commitment to God's People and to his Baptismal Covenant, Dick persisted. Through his *discipleship*, St Stephen's was the first church to house the homeless in January and February of 1992, and the Prado Day Center was built in 1998. The need for the faith communities to house the overflow ended in late 2018 ... 26yrs later. And with it, the Prado Day Center closed, and both services were commuted to the new 40 Prado Homeless Services Center.

In November of last year, at least 7 faith leaders – out of over 100 – were arrested at a protest outside the Broadview ICE facility in suburban Chicago<sup>1</sup>.

One of them was The Rev Michael Woolf, an American Baptist minister in Evanston. While peacefully protesting, Pastor Woolf, fully identifiable in his clerical collar, was grabbed by the wrist and yanked and thrown to the ground, arrested and taken into custody by ICE. After 7hrs in custody, with bruises all over his body due to his treatment by the officers, Pastor Woolf spoke to the press about the violent way he was treated:

*It's part of the dehumanizing nature of it, and it gives me a lot of clarity around what's happening here. Adding: It's really a spiritual emergency.*

In response to the detention of 21 demonstrators, the Department of Homeland Security posted on Twitter, not an account of what happened, nor a qualified apology, nor a qualified justification, but a mocking of demonstrators:

*Womp womp, cry all you want. These criminal illegal aliens aren't getting released. Like clockwork, violent rioters have arrived at the Broadview ICE facility to demand the release of some of the worst human beings on planet earth. Get a job you imbecilic morons.<sup>2</sup>*

Pastor Woolf's response to this unprofessional and derogatory statement from DHS was simple and focused on his mission: he was there "*demanding constitutional and due process rights*" for the detainees and "*that the Department of Homeland Security honor federal law by allowing detainees spiritual care.*" He later wrote on his blog:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ncronline.org/news/least-7-faith-leaders-arrested-broadview-ice-facility-protest>

<sup>2</sup> <https://x.com/DHSgov/status/1989402784316493957>

*It's important that I act as if Jesus is detained at the facility in Broadview. Matthew 25 makes it clear that whatever I do or withhold from the most vulnerable, I do or withhold from Jesus. Right now, it's hard for me to imagine a scarier place to be detained, and that makes my discernment about how to respond easy.<sup>3</sup>*

Through the actions of Dick Warren and Pastor Woolf, the inward and invisible grace of their Baptism was manifested, it was made known to others. It's what made them distinct from "nice people" ... not *better*, but *distinct*. With intentional drawing from the well of their faith in Christ, they served the poor and oppressed. They showed their:

*union with Christ in His Death and Resurrection, Birth into God's family the Church, forgiveness of sins, and new life in the Holy Spirit.*

I doubt that neither Dick Warren nor Pastor Woolf thought at their Baptism or at their Confirmation that the manifestation of their Baptism would be to house and feed the poor or to get arrested for demanding that the laws of the United States be followed by government agents. Just as John the Baptist preached hell, fire and damnation when Christ was to come and instead, Jesus was Baptized by him in the Jordan, very peacefully, following Christ doesn't always turn out as we expect. Rather, we often end up following Christ in ways we could have never imagined. But following Christ is just that: following God's plan, not setting out your own plan and presenting it to God. And in the Church, we call that *discipleship*.

The Epiphany in Baptism, the manifestation of the Christ of your Baptism is discipleship. In your Baptism, you are washed clean and given repentance. Through that repentance and acceptance of Christ comes transformation, gradual transformation into the likeness of Christ. Through that transformation comes discipleship and through discipleship comes that transformation.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://sojo.net/articles/opinion/i-was-arrested-outside-ice-facility-we-need-shut-down>

In its purest form, discipleship is what it says in the Collect:

*To keep the covenant [you] have made [at your Baptism],  
and boldly confess [Jesus] as Lord and Savior.*

Its manifestation is how you live your baptismal covenant in the world,  
empowered by the Holy Spirit.

<PAUSE>

*We want our child to have a choice of religions as s/he grows up, so  
we want him/her baptized.*

If the Epiphany of Baptism is discipleship, I'm not sure what these parents mean by this. A friend of mine who still hears this regularly thinks that the parents believe it's better to give their child something to accept or reject than to give them nothing at all. Perhaps they think of it as a qualification that they can whip out later or else keep the certificate hidden away. The exploration of that is for another sermon.

Baptism or Confirmation is not the end of a seeking or gaining a qualification or certificate. It is the *beginning* of a life in Christ and making Christ known by word and example. The Epiphany of Baptism – the Manifestation of Baptism is your daily participation in the Baptismal Covenant, which we are about to reaffirm together: *Discipleship*. That is the Epiphany, the Manifestation of Baptism.

Today's Gospel may not have continued the drama that we have been used to for the last 6 weeks. But as soon as that Dove descended upon Jesus, the promise of the drama continues. Manifest your Baptism and join the drama.