

January 11, 2026
The First Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A
The Baptism of our Lord
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Isaiah 42:1-9

Psalm 29

Acts 10:34-43

Matthew 3:13-17

In the Name of God, in whose Name, and into whose life we are baptized:
Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

Those of us who follow a liturgical calendar often find meaning, even delight, in the orderly progress of feasts and seasons across the course of the year. But this particular time of year presents some challenges to those of us who are linear thinkers. Seventeen days ago, we celebrated the birth of the Christ Child. Ten days ago, we recalled Jesus' circumcision and naming. Last week, we said hello *and* goodbye to the gift-bearing Magi who have now returned to their own country – in the attic.

Today, all of a sudden, here we are, some thirty years on, at the edge of the Jordan River, among a crowd rubbing shoulders with that once-upon-a-time baby from a couple weeks ago, now all grown up. The so-called "hidden years" are over, and the promised child is about to step into his promise.

From ancient times, along with the Epiphany and the wedding feast at Cana, Jesus' baptism was observed as a feast of light. They were called feasts of light because they illuminate God's nature; three occasions on which God chose to reveal an aspect of God incarnate in Jesus Christ.

But these feasts are not just about Jesus. They reveal to us what God is like who God wishes us to be. In other words, today is a feast of identity, both Christ's and our own.

I often hear people identify themselves by saying, "I was baptized a Catholic," or a Presbyterian, or an Episcopalian. But, as followers of the baptized Jesus, our baptismal identity is much, much larger than any denominational label. A Christian is baptized into the Christian faith. Baptism is that big. But let's not stop there.

Today's readings from Isaiah and Acts offer us glimpses of something bigger still: a God who is not limited by our understanding of baptism, or even sacramental theology. A God who created humanity in the divine image and whose love for us is so great that it embraces all people, no exceptions. A God who has taken us by the hand

and given us as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations. This God is beyond our understanding, and beyond our comfort zones.

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While pondering today's feast of light, the Baptism of Christ, I found myself thinking about anatomy, about baptismal anatomy. My guess is that, for most of us, we think immediately about our heads, specifically our foreheads. Many of us were baptized with a greater or lesser amount of water applied to our heads. (Fair warning: Your heads will likely get a little wet later on.) Those of us who mark ourselves with water from the font usually begin with our foreheads. We say that we dive in headfirst to indicate our enthusiastic embrace of something new, whether it's a spiritual discipline or a fitness regimen.

Now all of this makes a great deal of sense, but the question that has been nagging me all week is this: where does my identity as a baptized child of God begin? In my head? In my heart? What about my feet?

This brought to mind a story that's told about Parker Palmer. Born in 1939, Palmer is a noted educator, activist, and author, as well as the founder of the Center for Courage and Renewal. From the outside, this guy has it all together. And, he is prone to crippling bouts of depression.

When the black dog comes a-callin', Parker is scarcely able to tie his shoes, or to get up to shave. Friends would come by and say things like, "Gosh, Parker, why are you depressed? You helped so many people." These "buck up, Sparky" comments left him feeling even more depressed and guilty for being in that state.

One day a friend asked if he could massage Parker's feet. He agreed, and every day at 4 o'clock, without fail, the man came over, took off Parker's shoes and socks and massaged his feet for an hour. He said almost nothing for all those days and weeks, but Parker concluded, "I really don't have the words, but the act of massaging kept me connected to the human race."¹

He could only be reached through his feet. I have profound memories of my mother comforting my father as he lay dying by massaging his feet. So, I wasn't really surprised by Parker Palmer's story, because I share it. Maybe we all share it.

We are spiritual beings, but we experience everything through our physical bodies. Christianity is not a religion from the neck up. For goodness' sake, we profess our faith in an Incarnate God. Talking about the "spiritual life" as an intellectual activity makes about as much sense as Parker's friends telling him to "snap out of it." Their

¹ Krista Tippet, *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living* (Penguin, 2016), 93-94.

words could not touch him, because touch was what he needed to feel connected to the human race.

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Thinking about feet, let's revisit the moment of Jesus' baptism. Picture him wading into the water with all the rest of the folks gathered there. Having taken off his sandals, the soles of his bare feet were the first thing to touch the cool water of the river. Then his ankles, then his knees, until he was up to his waist and dunked by John in the Jordan. I like to imagine Jesus saying, to John and to us, without uttering a syllable, "I am neck deep in life with you."²

We are familiar with the symbolic overlap of water. That is to say, the waters of the baptismal font are not just the River Jordan, but also the waters of Creation, the Flood, and the Red Sea.

There is also a symbolic overlap with feet. One of Matthew's theological points is that Jesus was the new Moses, the embodiment of the New Covenant. Our stories tell us that Moses led the Children of Israel through the Red Sea with (as the hymn says) unmoistened foot. When the people were crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land, Moses' successor, Joshua, directed one priest from every tribe to carry the Ark of the Covenant ahead of the people. When they stepped foot into the river, the waters flowing downstream were cut off and stood up in a heap.³

When Jesus approaches John on the banks of the Jordan River the entirety of this collective memory comes into play. And all of it will be recapitulated in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of the Son of God.

Matthew, Mark and John give us the story of Jesus walking on the water. And, at the Last Supper, in commissioning his disciples to carry on his work with a new commandment of love, John tells us that Jesus takes water to wash their...feet.

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This Feast of Light raises questions for us. Who are we? How do we walk together into the work God has given us to do in the coming year? As we get our feet wet, and wade into the waters of these questions, I want you to hold in your heart Isaiah's image of God taking us by the hand and giving us as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations.

In a moment we will renew the vows of our baptismal covenant, rekindling our commitment to live, and walk, together as the Body of Christ. If you find yourself wondering how to live in, and with, and for Christ; if you are wondering how we might

² The Rev. Patrick Gahan, <https://livingchurch.org/2022/12/13/neck-deep-in-life-with-you/>

³ Joshua 3.

be brighter beacons of Christ by serving the people in the Central West End; if you are wondering how to find, and how to make sense of God's gift of grace to you in our deeply divided country; if you are wondering how to reclaim Epiphany as a season of light and hope when it feels like you're drowning in a rising tide of cruelty and violence, much of it state-sponsored, then listen carefully to the five questions I will be asking you.

As you listen, I invite you to hear six words: continue, persevere, proclaim, seek, serve, strive. These words, these verbs, are precisely about allowing yourself to be drawn more deeply, feet first, into the life of that corporate mystery that we call the Body of Christ. As Michael Curry, the former Presiding Bishop reminded us, the question to ask is not "who shall I be?" but "who shall we be?"

Baptism, and its renewal, is about getting our feet wet, and wading in, until we get neck deep in life with others in the family of God. The challenge, of course, is that the family of God is full of people who aren't like us, maybe people we don't even like. How do you face that challenge? You might start by recalling the bigness of baptism, which is a blessing, not a bludgeon.

The baptismal promises are not like New Year's resolutions, which are often a one-and-done sort of thing. Instead, they are a life-long, one foot in front of another, pilgrimage. The verbs in the Baptismal Covenant are also ongoing: continue, persevere, proclaim, seek, serve, strive.

Today, as you commit yourself to wade further into the Jordan, and as you seek to serve Christ in all persons, to respect the dignity of every human being, don't worry too much about getting in over your head, for the invitation is God's.

I leave you with words from Malcolm Guite.

"In that quick light and life, as water spills
And streams around the One like quickening rain,
The voice that made the universe reveals
The God in One who makes it new again.
He calls us too, to step into that river
To die and rise and live and love forever."⁴ Amen.

⁴ Malcolm Guite, <https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2015/01/09/the-first-sunday-of-epiphany-jesus-baptism-2/>. Guite's original "Man" has been lovingly altered to "One."