



Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,  
who gives breath to the people upon it,  
and spirit to those who walk in it:  
I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,  
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;  
I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations,  
to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who sit in darkness.  
I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other,  
nor my praise to idols.  
See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare;  
before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

**SECOND READING:                    Matthew 3:11-17**

*As we come to our reading from Matthew's Gospel,  
Scribes and Pharisees have joined others in coming to John for baptism.  
As reading begins, John continues to admonish them....*

"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."  
Then Jesus came from Galilee to John, at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.  
John would have prevented him,  
saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"  
But Jesus answered him,  
"Let it be so now; for it is proper for us – in this way –  
to fulfil all righteousness."  
Then he consented.  
And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water,  
suddenly the heavens were opened to him –  
and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove,  
and alighting on him.  
And a voice – from heaven –  
said, "This is my Son, the Beloved – with whom I am well pleased."

SERMON

“Immerse Yourself!”

The famous *author* and *mythologist*, **Joseph Campbell** –  
a *series presenter* on **PBS** a few years back –  
once said that the majority of his friends  
were living “waste-land” lives.

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“Many” – he said – “were just baffled,  
wandering in the waste-land,  
without any sense of *where the water is....*”

[Water – of course – is essential for virtually all forms of life!]

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In other words, they were baffled – and wandering,  
without any sense  
of how to *find their way* to a fruitful life;  
how to *find nourishment* for their souls;  
how to *immerse themselves* in the very Source of wholeness of life.

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**How to immerse themselves.....**

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Did you know that – in keeping with the tradition of the time –  
**Jesus’ baptism** – in the **River Jordan** – was *by immersion*?

And, if you picture him –  
coming up, and wading out of the water –  
you can visualize it as the *immersion of his whole being*  
in the **Holy Spirit of God**.

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But – as we come to our reading from **Matthew’s Gospel**,  
**Matthew’s account of the baptism of Jesus** –  
we must admit that *we know very little* about him.

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We do know that **Jesus** is about thirty years old.

And we know that – at age twelve –  
he had appeared – briefly, but significantly – in the **Temple**.

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And now, when **Jesus** *again appears* –  
at the **River Jordan** –  
it is about eighteen years later.

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But – regardless of how little we know about **Jesus' younger years** –  
this *brief episode* in the life of **Jesus** is *extraordinarily* important:

That is, **Matthew's** account of **Jesus' baptism**  
reveals the very essence of *who God is*,  
*how God* acts,  
and *what God* desires.

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Notably, **Matthew's** description of **Jesus' baptism**  
is the *only account* that has a *back-and-forth* –  
*a brief conversation* –  
between **Jesus** and **John**.

And *only here* – in the entire **New Testament** –  
is the **Greek** word for “*restrain*” or “*prevent*” used.

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Found in **verse 14**, *that* is the word **John** used –  
*to protest* –  
*to challenge Jesus* request to be *baptized by him*.

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For his part, **John** – quite reasonably –  
asserts that the order *should be reversed*:  
That is, **Jesus** should be the one *baptizing him*.

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In other words, **John** understands *his place*.

**John** knows *his role is to point* to the **One** –  
the **One** *who is greater* than he,  
the **One** whose sandals he is *unworthy to untie*.

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**John's assessment** is – of course – *correct*.

And – yet – **Jesus** responds to **John's** attempt to prevent his baptism,  
with the *assertion* that his baptism will “*fulfill all righteousness.*”

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**This phrase is – in essence – a liturgical one.**

It is a prayer...,  
a commandment...,  
a plea...,  
and a proclamation....

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To “*fulfill all righteousness*”  
is to be *totally in alignment* with the **will of God**.

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Indeed, the *identity*, the *character*, and the *purpose* –  
of *both John and Jesus* –  
*are revealed* in Jesus' baptism.

And this revelation occurs when the *heavens open up*,  
and **God speaks**,  
and the **Holy Spirit descends**.

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**Duty and destiny** come together –  
when **Jesus** stands on the side of the river *with sinners* –  
and *submits* to baptism.

And **John** – *uncomfortable*, and *unworthy* –  
then *submerges* the **Divine** in the waters of the **Jordan**.

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**What – then – is at stake here?**

Everything!

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**Jesus'** identity, character, and purpose are all *explicitly revealed* –  
and *recorded* –

by **Matthew**:

“*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*”

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The very, **Beloved, Son of God** –  
*sinless* though he is –  
*submits* to the waters of baptism!

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In his book – *God Against Religion* –  
**Matthew Myer Boulton** puts it this way: *(Emphasis added)*

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“Imagine the **Jordan River**,  
a *line of unwashed sinners* on one side,  
waiting anxiously for baptism.

And, a line of those *newly washed clean* on the other.

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And – now – comes **God the Son**,  
**Jesus of Nazareth**,  
the *only one* among them all  
who *might truly* claim to be clean and pure.

And, he proceeds to *get in line with the sinners*...

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He *crosses the Jordan* – so to speak – in the *opposite direction*:  
from ‘*clean*’ to ‘*sinner*,’  
from *insider* to *outsider*...

He *confirms his solidarity with sinners* by submitting to baptism...”

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And so it is that – as our reading from **Isaiah** attested –  
The “*bruised reeds*” – and “*dim wicks*” –  
have the very, **Beloved Son** on *their* side!

So it is that *sinners have a shot at salvation*!

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And the **Son** – who *now submits* to baptism – will also *submit to death*.

He will *come up* from the grave – as he did from the water –  
for the sake of the unclean:  
the underdogs,  
Gentiles,  
prisoners,  
Pharisees...

Roman soldiers,  
Pontius Pilate,  
even, denying Peter...

indeed, for the sake of all of **God's** fallen – *yet beloved* – world.

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*This* is who our **God** is;  
this is *how radically* our **God** loves;  
and this is *how far* our **God** will go –  
in order to *establish justice*, and *show mercy*.

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And – the **Good News** is –  
there is nothing that *anyone* – or *anything* –  
can ultimately do to defeat **God's purpose**.

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**Indeed, this is *our* baptismal hope, as well.**

In **Baptism** – by the power of the **Holy Spirit** –  
living water *wells up inside us* like a spring,  
enabling us to *share in the eternal life* of **God** –  
here, and now!

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In the remote desert regions of the **Southwestern United States**,  
temperatures soar above **120 degrees** every summer.

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The earth *cakes*, and *cracks*.

To *lift one's face* to the early afternoon sun  
is like *standing too close* to the open door of a hot oven.

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Yet – in spite of the terrible heat –  
even the most isolated desert areas are home for many people.

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**The reason is simple:**

there is *much more* to the blazing desert *than meets the eye*.

*Below* the parched expanse of rock, cactus, and sagebrush,  
there are pools, streams, and underground rivers.

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Residents dig wells – sometimes as shallow as six feet –  
and *draw all the water* they need.

And – *as long as they have water* – they can live,  
even in the most blistering conditions.

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Because they *have tapped into* that precious **source of life** –  
a source which flows *beneath the visible surface* –  
they *can survive* in the desert – throughout the seasons of life!

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**A corresponding reality applies to us:**

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In terms of our *spiritual survival* – our *ultimate fulfillment* –  
we need to discover that precious **Source of Life**  
that flows *deep within* our souls.

We need to tap that precious **Source of Life** –  
which **Jesus** later described as “*living water*.” (John 4:10)

*“Those who drink of the water that I will give them  
will never be thirsty.*

*“The water that I will give  
will become – in them – a spring of water  
gushing up to eternal life.”* (John 4:13-14)

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And – even more **Good News** –  
**Jesus’** words of eternal life are *also meant for us*, today.

The living water that **Jesus** gives still turns into *a spring within us*,  
“*gushing up to eternal life.*”  
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Indeed – as **Oswald Chambers** has written –  
the **Holy Spirit** in us is the *earnest* –  
the *down payment* –  
of eternal life, *here and now!*

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It is *also true* that –  
just as **Jesus' Baptism** marked his *inauguration for ministry* –  
and, *our own* Baptisms do so, as well.

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We – who have been received into the **Community of the Beloved Son**,  
through the **Baptism of water** –  
have *also been commissioned by God*,  
to *do his will* on earth.

We have *each been equipped* with the ability to be a **mirror-image**  
of **God's great love** for *all of humankind*.

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And – as a **community of Christ** –  
bound together by a common **Baptismal Hope** –  
we can *tap into the secret* of living the **Good Life**.

We can be *nourished and sustained* by the precious **Life Source**,  
which *flows beneath* the visible surface – of visible, life events.

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We *can be immersed* in the **Living Water** –  
water that makes our lives *eternally new*.

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A pastor called the office of a magazine that he enjoyed –  
to renew his subscription.

And – sensing a friendly voice on the other end –  
he engaged in a chatty conversation –  
with the woman who answered.

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The preacher then shared with her that –  
ever since he retired, some 20 years earlier –  
he was busier than ever –  
with preaching assignments, and other pastoral calls.

“I’m eighty-six,” he told the woman,  
“and it doesn’t look like my second retirement  
will be coming anytime soon.”

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The woman was impressed by the vitality in the pastor’s tone.

She said, “from the sound of your voice,  
I would have guessed that you were easily 25 years younger!”

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The clergyman laughed.

He said, “That’s what a lot of people tell me.

“I just wish more of them would tap into the fountain of youth –  
that I discovered, many years ago.

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“The surest way to stay young at heart is to *be of service* to others.”

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Indeed, the **Journal of Psychology and Aging** published yet another study –  
offering *scientific proof* of that gentleman’s assertion.

**Doing good for others is *also good for you.***

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In a study of several thousand people, over **age 50**,  
those who had volunteered **200 hours** or more in the last year –  
just *four hours a week* –  
*lowered their risk* of developing **high blood pressure**  
by **40%** over the *next four years.*

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Returning to our **Gospel** reading – after **Jesus’ Baptism** – (Matthew 3:17)  
“*the heavens opened,*  
*and the Spirit of God descended on Him like a dove.*”

And – thanks to the **grace of God** –  
the **Holy Spirit of God** still *descends on us*, today.

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Consequently, the happy result is that *true happiness lies within us,*  
because of *the indwelling, Holy Spirit of God.*

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*Our need for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit*  
is expressed – very beautifully –  
in this prayer of the **Ancient Church**:

Come, oh Holy Spirit, Come!  
Come like Holy Fire, and burn within us!  
Come like Holy Wind, and cleanse us!  
Come like Holy Light and lead us!  
Come as Holy Truth, and teach us!  
Come as Holy Love, and enfold us!  
Come as Holy Power, and enable us!  
Come as Abundant Life,  
and Fill us,  
Convert us,  
Consecrate us,  
Until we are wholly Thine!  
Come, oh Holy Spirit, Come!

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Friends – in **Jesus' Baptism** –  
**God** is *calling us to immerse ourselves in Living Water*.

**God** wants us to *immerse ourselves* in the **Holy Spirit of Love**,  
and – then – *to share* in the **eternal life of God**,  
*here, and now*.

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May we remember **Jesus' baptism** – *and* our own.

And may we *then go forth*,  
and *demonstrate the difference* those waters make –  
*not* just for us,  
but for **all of creation**!

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**In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit:**

*Amen.*

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## AFFIRMATION OF FAITH (*Unison*)

*Adapted from the Second Helvetic Confession (1561)*

Now to be baptized in the name of Christ is to be enrolled, entered, and received into the covenant and family, and so into the inheritance of the sons of God; yes, and in this life, to be cleansed also from the filthiness of sins, and to be granted the manifold grace of God, in order to lead a new and innocent life.

Baptism, therefore, calls to mind and renews the great favor God has shown to humanity. For we are all born in the pollution of sin, and are the children of wrath. But God, who is rich in mercy, freely cleanses us from our sins by the blood of his Son, and – in him – adopts us to be his children, and – by a holy covenant – joins us with himself, and enriches us with various gifts, that we might live a new life. Thanks be to God! Amen.

## A PRAYER FOR THE NEW YEAR AND THE LORD'S PRAYER

*Adapted from a prayer by Jill Duffield, former editor of The Presbyterian Outlook*

Great God of all times and all places,  
as we have flipped our calendars to 2026,  
we are profoundly grateful that –  
while you are always doing a new thing –  
your character of loving kindness remains constant.

As we review a year's worth of events –  
in our lives, and in the life of the world –  
we confess to sometimes questioning your wisdom,  
your power, and – even – your goodness.

We cannot help but lament inconsolable losses.  
We cannot refrain from asking, "Why?"  
in the face of violence, destruction, and death.

We cannot keep from wondering, "How long, O Lord?"  
And – perhaps too often – we pray,  
"I believe, but, Lord, help my unbelief."  
Trusting that you do not reject us –  
even when we question, doubt, and grieve –  
and grateful that – instead –  
you meet us where we are, embrace us, and comfort us;  
we take a moment to share with you the past year's  
greatest hurts, deepest sorrows, and occasions of suffering.

*(A Time for Silent prayer.)*

Almighty and most gracious God,  
it would be unfaithful of us not to also look back –  
to rejoice, and give thanks:

For there have also been many instances of grace,  
    outpourings of mercy,  
        and flickers – even brilliant flashes – of light in the darkness.  
So, help us to remember – and to be grateful for –  
    the many times we have been forgiven,  
        despite the evidence of our guilt.  
Keep us ever mindful of each person who has cared for us,  
    helped us, encouraged us, or – even –  
        prayed for us...without our knowledge.  
Do not let us forget the ever-present beauty that surrounds us:  
    the wonders of your good creation, the variety of artistic, human creations,  
        and the uniqueness of each person – made in your very image.  
May the light of harvest moons, the melodies of music,  
    the rhythmic movements of dancers,  
        and the prophetic words of poets  
            inspire us to share the gifts you given to us for your glory.  
Indeed, knowing that you created all that is – seen and unseen –  
    and called it good;  
and, knowing that your Spirit works relentlessly –  
    in us, through us, and – sometimes – despite us –  
        to bring about justice, compassion, and mercy,  
we take a moment to share with you the past year's greatest joys,  
    most amazing manifestations of beauty,  
        and surprising moments of grace.....

*(A Time for Silent prayer.)*

Eternal God of memory and hope,  
    you call on us not only to be a people who remember,  
        but – also – to be a people who look forward to the future  
            with eager anticipation.  
As we stand at the beginning of 2026,  
    grant us a sure sense of your purpose, and gift us with the courage,  
        strength, energy, intelligence, imagination, and love –  
            that we need to serve you faithfully.  
Indeed, make us signs of your reign –  
    living, breathing, symbols of servant leadership, sacrificial love,  
        radical forgiveness, the peace that passes understanding,  
            and unstoppable, rolling-down-like water, justice.  
As we continue to live our days,  
    may we hunger for your coming kingdom,  
        and be ready – at any moment –  
            to welcome Christ, as he makes his promised return.

And – believing that you equip those whom you call –  
we boldly ask to be ever-empowered by the mighty wind of the Holy Spirit.  
We pray that the Spirit's flame will burn away our dross,  
illuminate our paths, and shine so brightly – in us –  
that we might be the light of the world –  
the light that Jesus called us to be.  
Indeed, silence in us any voice but your own,  
as we pause to hear your voice,  
and listen to discern your will for us in our own time and place.

*(A Time for Silent prayer.)*

Holy God, Who was, and is, and evermore shall be –  
our Beginning and our End – gather up the fragments of last year,  
bless them, and use them – in ways that will nourish us –  
your children – in the year ahead.  
We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, the Alpha and the Omega,  
the beginning and the end,  
your Son, and our Savior;  
who taught his first disciples to use these words when they pray:

**PRAYER OF DEDICATION (*Unison*)**

**We pray, O God, that our offerings might delight you. We bring them to encourage all who work for justice and peace on your behalf, that they may not grow faint, or be crushed by opposition. May these gifts help the oppressed find healing, the discouraged receive hope, and those who are bound discover freedom – both through – and beyond – our efforts. Amen.**

**CHARGE AND BENEDICTION**

The love – and the Spirit – of God are available to us,  
just as they were to Jesus.

And – like Jesus – we can also share them;  
leading both to the glory of our God,  
and to the only true – and lasting – happiness for us!

Let us receive the Lord's benediction....