

JANUARY 11, 2026

Sermon Text

Matthew 3: 13-17 (NRSVue)

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. **14** John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” **15** But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then (John) consented. **16** And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God’s Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. **17** And a voice from the heavens said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

SERMON: “Expecting the Unexpected”

Picture this: The conductor steps out on the stage from the side wings, and we in the audience start to clap enthusiastically, excited that the performance that we’ve been anticipating for a long time is about to begin. We see the percussionists step up to their drums and cymbals and gongs, preparing to add the driving rhythmic beat or the jarring “crash” that will punctuate the piece. Whether it’s “The 1812 Overture,” “Carmina Burana,” or the contemporary “Imperial March” from the movie “Star Wars,” we’re expecting military rhythms or bombastic chords. Then the conductor holds out his arm to introduce the guest musician, and a young person walks out on the stage. They’re holding a flute, and they bring it to their lips, beginning to softly play with the downstroke of the conductor’s baton.

But rather than the entire orchestra joining in, she’s playing mostly alone, with only a few orchestra members softly adding accompaniment. It’s the melody line that we expected – but that isn’t the orchestra arrangement we’ve always heard in the past. It’s lacking the big entrance that you’ve come to expect from these pieces. It’s pretty evident that this arrangement isn’t what we’re used to hearing. It’s a really different interpretation, almost making you scratch your head and ask yourself, “Am I at the right concert?” The expected has become – unexpected.

On this first Sunday after Epiphany, the church traditionally celebrates the Baptism of Jesus. It’s one of the stories recorded in all three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. But each tells it in a slightly different way, with Matthew adding details we don’t see in the other two. We read Matthew’s version as we leave the infancy stories of Jesus, and prepare to see him enter into

his public ministry. But first, he makes a trip to the Jordan River, where his relative, John, is baptizing and preaching and trying to wake up the crowd to repent. He knows the time is coming for the Messiah to be revealed to God's people, and he shouts and rants and exhorts these people coming out to this spot from the villages and cities of Judea, curious to see what all the ruckus is about. It even drew some religious law scholars and leaders, persons that identified as Pharisees and Sadducees. Maybe they wanted to scope out what this new wilderness prophet was ranting about. Maybe several of them also wanted to hear a message that would fill in something that was spiritually missing from their current religious practice. But John isn't very tactful in his approach, and he confronts them pretty directly. "So, you think because you are 'sons of Abraham,' born into and devoutly practicing the Jewish faith, that this level will automatically save you? Produce fruit appropriate to your repentance!" John was giving his listeners an early rendition of the Book of James statement, "Faith without works is a dead faith."

And then we come to the moment of Jesus' arrival that we read today. He's not yet started to teach, and preach and heal – it's the beginning point of his public ministry. But unlike the other two gospels, there is a dialogue between Jesus and John. We hear this request unnerves John – wait, you're the one greater than me. I'm the one not even worthy of crouching down and tying the laces on your sandal! I need to be baptized by you!" And Jesus said "allow me to be baptized." Allow me. Don't get in my way. Allow me to model God's requirements for show my subservience – not to you John, but to God. Let me begin to fulfill my purpose. With Jesus' response, John agreed to baptize Jesus. Then we get one of the beautiful images and analogies in the New Testament: "Heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down *like a dove* and resting on him. A voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son whom I dearly love; with whom I am well pleased.'" In different contemporary translations, it sometimes reads, "I find happiness in him."

From this image, we have a picture in our minds that we now equate with the Holy Spirit: a dove-like "thing" descending down from the sky. We don't know what it looked like when "heaven was opened to him;" it's often depicted in art as the parting of clouds, a beam of light directed down on Jesus. It wasn't a literal bird that came down or the Greek would have said "and a dove descended." But Christians often use, in movies and paintings and drawings, the image of the bird, a dove, descending to depict the gift of the Holy Spirit coming upon Jesus. The late first century early Jewish Christians would have understood

this analogy very similarly to us today – the dove was, and still is, a symbol of peace. God’s Spirit and peace are one. And so, unlike the tone and wording of John the Baptist, a very unexpected message comes out of this interaction between the divine and human nature of Jesus. It tells us what the promised one, the Messiah, was really coming to do.

So first, let’s look at the actual baptism of Jesus. It’s created debates in theological circles since the gospels were written. And Matthew’s version, with the dialogue between John and Jesus, seems to be trying to clarify some of the confusion going on in the early Christian faith of Matthew’s time regarding just what Jesus’ baptism meant. Baptism wasn’t created by Jesus; it wasn’t created even by John. Baptism was a Jewish practice at this time, intended to symbolize a washing away of the uncleanness of the past, and a renewed dedication lived in obedience to God, Yahweh. Temple sacrifices were the first ritual given from the Torah to show atonement for sins, a burning away of human wrongs and failings, to get back in right-relationship with God. After the destruction of the first Temple, other ways were devised to “fill in” that gap in religious ritual. When the Bible talks about “John’s baptism,” it’s referring to this alternative rite, using water not fire. With that understanding of the rite of baptism, a substitute for temple offerings for sacrifice, the debate began after Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension: if Jesus was also fully divine, what did HE have to repent over? How could his heart need changing if he was really the son of God and fully in alignment with the Godhead, the Father? And that confusion can linger to today, especially with the contemporary interpretation of baptism in some church denominations that see it as a prerequisite for demonstrating a “born again” experience, one that defines one as saved versus not-saved, a religious rite that determines eternal salvation, or the absence of which calls eternal damnation into play. In this interpretation of baptism, the question can linger for some: Why would the son of God have to be saved from eternal suffering and damnation by being baptized?

In our Reformed theological understanding of baptism, we don’t see baptism as an indication of being saved or not saved. And this understanding clarifies that this wasn’t about saving Jesus’ soul from going to a place named Hell. At the heart of Matthew’s version of Jesus’ baptism, and what we believe as Presbyterians, is the issue of *submission*, as revealed in the conversation between John and Jesus. The word *submit* is a verb that indicates action that accepts or yields to a superior force, or yielding to the authority or will of another person. What we hear in the dialogue between John and Jesus, that isn’t included in the

other two gospels, is that Jesus *submitting* humbly to another who is superior, in a posture of servanthood. In John's mind, Jesus was the person who was higher ranked. And Jesus is letting him know – it's not about submitting to you or me, John – it's about submitting to God. Jesus is participating in baptism as a gesture of submitting to his human side, part of his God-breathed purpose for coming to earth as human. Jesus, in this act of humility, is showing who his life is dedicated to, and who will guide his ministry going forward. He is God's servant, and his life is going to be lived from that point on in total submission to God's plan. He starts to show us what servant leadership is, and where it begins – with God.

God's plan is then revealed in the second half of this baptismal moment, the symbol of "something like a dove" coming down from the heavens, and a voice heard by those in earshot indicating that God is pleased, God is happy, in this symbol of submission to serve God alone. And God's peace is the plan. The path to being in right-relationship with God is the way of servanthood, peaceably turning over control to God.

We heard and saw that the coming of the Messiah occurred in a very unexpected way in the Advent and Christmas stories. Coming as a helpless infant, a confusing choice of parents by God, the first announcement to marginalized people – women, dirty shepherds, wise foreigners. We sang "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus" – but the way he arrived did not match what was expected in how a new king would arrive. And after hearing John's strident preaching and ranting at the hypocrisy of those using religious rituals to keep from truly turning to God's ways, Jesus comes in unexpectedly with a different way of looking at what God's kingdom looks like and what it will bring about. It comes by following God's guiding voice, not the voice of those in power. It comes following images of peace versus images of cutting and burning down. Right at the initiating point to Jesus' public ministry, the message was unexpected. Roles were reversed and servanthood – not political and economic superiority – is the message, and Jesus repeats it over and over again in his teachings: folks, the people we think will be first will be last; and those our world puts in the back of the line, that we thought would be last, well, they're the ones who will be first in God's kingdom. Human expectations will not be met throughout Jesus' ministry. The unexpected is what we should expect.

The prophet Isaiah's words are Spirit-breathed; he saw this upside-down kingdom coming centuries before the arrival of the Messiah:

1 Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;

I have put my spirit upon him; ...
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

And Isaiah went on to write:

9 See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them.

Something new was happening and the expected things were going away. It was a time of unexpected epiphany, revealing who God really was and what God's kingdom really would be when "heaven and earth become one."

It's difficult for us on this side of the story to feel the unexpectedness of Jesus. The analogy of the very different concert as we started this sermon tried to convey the puzzlement, the confusion and need to reorient ourselves in that example to the same puzzlement, confusion, and reorienting expectations that Jesus' baptism also created. When we remember our own baptisms, that moment when our parents, guardians, or through our own adult decision to join the family of God, it's the moment of submission to God's personal plan for our life, when we celebrate the unexpected that this new life brings to us. A life lived continuing to grow in relationship to God, through knowledge and understanding of God's being and will. A life growing in servanthood to others as we give them a glimpse of God's kingdom in our thoughts, words and deeds. Our baptism is a moment that symbolizes and empowers us to submit to God's will. And in that submission the unexpected can and will happen. New things spring forth not out of power and physically willing God's way onto others, but spring out of peace, love, humility. As Jesus' prepared for his ministry, he submitted to being God's servant. And so, as we walk forward in our own growth as disciples of Jesus Christ, may we continue to reflect and act upon the ways our own will needs to submit to God's ways and purposes. In our walk as disciples, may we expect the unexpected. Amen.