

January 11, 2026
The Baptism of Jesus
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Keeping the Lights On

Matthew 3:13-17

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 fulfill 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."

It is January 11th and in the Pendleton home we still have our Christmas tree up. Gone are the ornaments and the village that I set up under the tree each year. The creche from my childhood with its precious (to me at least) figurines made of some kind of clay-like plastic, is boxed up. The Santa pillow gone. The red tablecloths and the handmade stockings all put away. Yet the lights are still up – white lights of course – and the star atop is wobbly but hanging on.

We are not usually "those people" who have Christmas decorations up until the spring or summer and I know it should come down: its pine branches are as dry as a bone. And I know why we haven't. It's the lights.

Starting a new calendar year continues to be a daunting experience and process for me. Newness can be a challenge. A whole new year ahead. The old is known and familiar: good or bad. The new is open to both promise and uncertainty. Who knows what the New Year will bring? It is open and daunting.

Only two days into 2026, events on the ground in South America have caused many of the people we pray for and know on the island of Cuba with feelings of vulnerability and fear. My first visit there was 40 years ago. Very little has changed for the good. Our parish has forged many personal ties on the eight plus mission trips we have taken since 2014. Bishop Rob joined us in 2019. We carry with us water systems parts, medicines, food, prayer books, candles and companionship. We visit homes, worship, share meals and to a person return to New Hampshire inspired by the people's faith and resilience.

I have been in almost daily contact with clergy and others on the ground there. They are waiting and watching to see if lasting and peaceful change will come to this nation only 90 miles off our shores – or more chaos and hardship. The fact of the matter is that after more than a million and half people – mostly young professionals -- have fled the island over the last two years, those left are older and frail and weakened by the many mosquito born viruses plaguing the island. There are many children left behind to be raised by their grandparents. Please continue to pray for the people there as many in the world wait and watch.

The Apostle Paul reminds us that being church. (1 Corinthians 12:26) If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” May rejoicing come soon.

Maybe that’s another reason our Christmas lights are still on our tree at home.

The church calendar pushes us into the Epiphany season. The Magi have come and gone to pay homage the Christ children the Holy Family have escaped to Egypt and found their way back home to Nazareth to raise Jesus. It would up on Galilee – in his childhood and teenage years and early adulthood that we know very little detail about from the Gospels. Yet on this feast day, the Baptism of Jesus, we jump right over those years and find ourselves beside the River Jordan.

I don’t remember where I heard it or who first said it, but a commentator on current events and elections said that politics is about addition and not subtraction. Meaning that success campaigns find ways to add to their base of support and hopefully not alienate or turn away potential voters. Makes perfect sense to me.

Baptism is about addition. Adding to people to the growing and living Body of Christ we call the church.

It is always about looking at how and where we begin.

Jesus heard a call and desire to begin his public ministry in the same way that all those who would follow him could echo. His baptism by John was public for a reason. One, it clarified that John, even though he had a large following and many believe was a mentor and teacher to Jesus, he was not “the one.” John gave way for Jesus to step into the role he was born and chosen to fulfill.

It also allowed for a moment for God to speak out in the open. The heavens were opened and the Spirit of God descended like a dove. What God said was this: “This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

This is the moment that draws a line back to our reading from the prophet Isaiah. Jesus once asked a blind man: “What do you want me to do for you?” The man responded: “I want to see.”

I think of the passage from Isaiah as God asking the people the same question: What do you want me to do? Christians see the promise of a Messiah in these verses. I will choose a servant. A chosen one. I will delight in this servant. I will put my spirit upon this servant.

This servant will bring forth justice to all nations – not just a few remote clans and tribes. This servant will multiply justice by bringing light, opening eyes, and release those who are captive. This to me is who God is and what God does in our world even today. Inviting people to hear the Good news of what is possible in their lives: forgiveness, healing, love for others and ourselves -- and hope for what is now unfolding and what is to come.

Isaiah: See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare.

Christianity at its core is about addition. Inviting and adding to those who can see a different way of living and believing.

One of my faith mottos has long been the opening line of a book from a former mentor of mine in Maryland. Dr. Loren Mead wrote: God is calling us to be more than we have been. More not less. Changed and ever-changing people, not static and frozen. Open and not closed to new possibilities. How do we move into this new year?

We can recommit to be aspirational people. We can work to spend more time on those things that will endure and hold up over time and perhaps not worry about all that is fleeting and temporary. We can recommit to find ways to deepen our faith. To pray more. To find times of silence. To ask God to do for us what only God can do – to renew the world.

We can believe that those gathered on the side of that river so many years ago were not just eavesdropping on the private conversation between a heavenly father and his son. “This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We too are loved.

I realize that we are just one week away from the national holiday remembering and honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. So, in a way I’m a bit early with what I have to share.

And then we have the events on the ground in Minneapolis this past week when a woman named Renee Nicole Good was shot by an ICE agent at close range. The whole event was traumatic and violent, senseless and disturbing. Protests have erupted and vigils are ongoing. One can only conclude that we are on a very raw moment in our nation – again. Non-violent marches and acts of civil disobedience can quickly spiral in today’s climate of fear and suspicion.

What would Dr. King say to us today to navigate us through these waters?

He never gave into violence and always believed that nonviolent actions like boycotts and marches were the best way to achieve the civil and voting rights.

The end of nonviolent action, King said, is “reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men.”

When Dr. King talked about the Beloved Community, he was talking about a society governed not by violence or conflict, but by love. He wrote in 1957:

“Love is creative and redemptive. Love builds up and unites; hate tears down and destroys. Physical force can repress, restrain, coerce, destroy, but it cannot create and organize anything permanent; only love can do that. Yes, love — which means understanding, creative and redemptive goodwill, even for one’s enemies — is the solution....”

I’ll leave it there.

And for now, we’re keeping our lights on -- maybe not the tree -- for a while longer.