

Matthew 3:13-17 “A Promise of New Life”

Let's talk about water for a moment. For a lot of folks, water is calming—lakes, rivers, or even the ocean on a clear calm day. But water can also be terrifying. Few people understand this better than filmmaker James Cameron. Over the last four decades, Cameron has made a career out of telling stories set in places where humans are not meant to survive: the crushing depths of the ocean, the cold, dark places where you cannot breathe. Whether it's *The Abyss*, *Titanic*, or *Avatar: The Way of Water*, Cameron keeps returning to the same setting—not because it's safe or familiar, but because it's dangerous. He's also a National Geographic explorer-in-residence who has explored the Mariana Trench, a place that's so deep and hostile that human life simply cannot exist without extraordinary intervention and specialized watercraft. What draws him there is what has always drawn humans to the sea: water is powerful. It *gives* life—and it can take it away. That tension matters for our scripture today, because the Bible never treats water as neutral.

In the ancient Near East, water was feared. The sea represented chaos, destruction, and forces beyond human control. Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, and Israelites all told stories of chaotic sea creatures and unruly waters that only the gods could restrain. Even seafaring peoples like the Phoenicians respected and feared the ocean.

In the first creation story in Genesis, we're told that “darkness was upon the face of the deep.” Creation does not begin with dry land, but with chaotic waters. Only when God separates land from sea does any kind of order happen. The waters aren't evil—but they are dangerous. They are a place where humans cannot survive on their own. And yet, that's where God begins.

Human life depends entirely on breath. Every cell in our body relies on oxygen to live. When breath stops, life stops. In the second creation

story of Genesis, God forms the human from dust and breathes life into Adam's nostrils. And as I've said before, in both Hebrew and Greek—the original languages of Scripture—the same word is used for *breath* and *spirit*. Breath is not just biological; it is spiritual. Breath is life given by God. Which raises an important question: Why is baptism—being immersed in water—so central to the Christian faith?

For ancient Jews, water was about restoration. If you'd been around sickness or death, or anything else that rendered you unclean, you washed so you could rejoin your community in everyday life. Simple as that. But by Jesus' time, immersion had picked up deeper meaning. For some people, going under the water had become an act of repentance—a way of saying, *I'm ready to live differently.*

So when John appeared at the Jordan River, calling people to repentance and baptizing them in the river, he wasn't just offering a ritual. He was inviting people to step into something risky—to enter the waters and come back changed. So imagine how unexpected it must have been when Jesus showed up. Matthew tells us that Jesus traveled from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. But John protests: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus insists. And Matthew simply says, "Then he consented." Jesus consents to going under the water. He steps into a place associated with chaos and danger. He allows himself to be submerged in a place where humans cannot breathe. For a moment, he's helpless. For a moment, he cannot draw breath. In a very real sense, he is buried. And when he comes up out of the water—when breath returns to him—Matthew says the heavens opened. The Spirit descends like a dove. And a voice says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Notice the order: Descent. Breath. Spirit. Beloved.

There is something almost dangerous about baptism. When we consent to baptism, we agree to enter an environment where humans cannot live on their own. Granted, it's only for a moment—but it's a moment

without breath. A moment of surrender. A moment where the old self loses control. Of course, we don't literally drown. But we *are* raised into a different life. As the apostle Paul puts it, "It is no longer I who lives, but it is Christ who lives in me." Baptism is not self-improvement. You are imitating the process of death and resurrection.

So why, then, is baptism one of the most important sacraments of the Christian faith? To baptize someone means you have to be immersed in water. You might be thinking, "No you don't! I was baptized in a Methodist church and I wasn't immersed!" Someone else might say, "I was baptized in the Catholic church, and I don't even remember it because I was an infant!" We in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are one of many Protestant denominations that baptize by immersion – in other words, candidates are completely immersed in the water as you saw a couple of months ago when I baptized Connor Story. In fact, there are some denominations that require you to be *re-baptized* if you were baptized by any other means than immersion. Some churches assign an observer who specifically watches to make sure every part of the person goes underwater. If not, you've got to try again until they are sufficiently dunked.

I've also got to say that we are spoiled here at First Christian Church, Chico. We can control the temperature of the water in our baptismal. In fact, when I baptized Emily Nelson, I thought the water was a little too warm. Emily said, "It's fine. It's kind of like a hot tub." Now, on the other side of that, Snowville Christian Church where Mary served in Virginia did not have a baptismal. Ever since the church was founded in the early 1800s, they walked down to the river across the road to baptize their folks. That might be appealing on a hot summer day. Not so much in January.

I was baptized on November 18, 1983, at the Veneta Missionary Alliance Church. Thankfully, they had a heated baptismal. My friend Lori Brinson was baptized that evening too, and our youth pastor, Greg Johnson, spent weeks preparing us. Greg told us baptism carried many

meanings. It wasn't about becoming ritually acceptable to God—as if we had to pass some kind of test to earn God's love. It was an act of cleansing, yes—but also an act of dying to our old selves and being raised to new life. He called it “an outward profession of an inward confession.” And it wasn't just for us. It was for the community—to witness and receive who we were becoming. More than forty years later, I still remember that night in vivid detail. And every so often, I need to remember the promise I made—and the promise God made to me.

Every January our culture jumps on the “new year's resolution bandwagon” and tells us it's time to reinvent ourselves. New year. New you. Stronger habits. Better discipline. And if some of those changes stick, that's a gift. But baptism is not about self-improvement. It's about surrender. God does not promise that we will become better versions of ourselves. God promises that we will become *new*. The Jesse of November 17, 1983 no longer lives. It is now with Christ who lives in me. And when I forget that—when I slip back into old fears, old patterns, old ways of breathing—I don't need a new resolution. I need to remember the water. I need to remember being lowered into a place where I could not breathe on my own. I need to remember being lifted up and given breath again. I need to remember the promise spoken over me before I ever got it right. Because in baptism, we pass through chaos and are met by grace. We go down, and God brings us up. We lose one life, and God gives us another. That promise still holds. The water still tells the truth. And the voice still speaks: *You are my beloved.*