A Homily by the Rev. Dr. Renée Tembeckjian
Trinity Episcopal Church
11 January 2026
Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

"Naming Rites"

Just as Christmas is more than a single day, but a season of twelve days, so, too, is Epiphany more than one story about Magi bearing gifts for a holy child. And just as the Christmastide stories magnify the initial impact of Jesus' birth, Epiphanytide leads us beyond Bethlehem in stories of its own.

This day – the 1st Sunday after the Epiphany – always opens with the familiar scene of Jesus approaching the Jordan River, where his cousin, John, is baptizing with a message of repentance – calling people to "turn around" and change their errant ways. When Jesus joins the crowd at the water's edge to be baptized himself, a surprised and somewhat incredulous John says no – that it should be the other way around – Jesus is the one should be baptizing *him*. But Jesus insists and John complies.

Centuries of theological study and deep debate continue over whether Jesus needed to be baptized at all. As to why he chose to do it, we might begin with the reason he himself gave: "It is proper in this way for us to fulfill all righteousness." That sounds very biblical and correct…but what on earth does it mean?

We cannot presume to understand it all, of course, but we can identify some of the many and complex dimensions in what Jesus was doing:

Honoring the tradition: Ritual cleansing was an important rite in Jewish culture. Immersion in the mikveh, or ritual bath, was repeated at threshold moments throughout one's life: conversion, marriage, childbirth, mourning. This is certainly a threshold moment for him.

Inaugurating his ministry: Not in private, but in public, just as our baptismal practice is not private, but public. Jesus affirms John's ministry while visibly accepting his own mission.

Identifying his humanity: In taking his place along with the others at the water's edge, Jesus declares himself as fully human, in relationship *with* us, standing *with* us, as one *of* us.

Acknowledging the cost: This is more subtle. John the Baptist was descended from Aaron – from a lineage of priests, who, in the Jewish tradition, would offer the sacrifices in the temple. And so, when John lifts up Jesus in baptism, it is a terribly tender foreshadowing of the *ultimate* sacrifice – the price Jesus will be willing to pay for his own discipleship.

Claiming the promise: Whatever we believe about his reasons, scripture conveys that as he emerged from the baptismal water, Jesus experienced the presence of God so vividly and so palpably that it is described as the Spirit descending upon him like a dove, and, in this moment, he perceives himself named as *Beloved of God.*

Naming and Baptism go back a long way. In our tradition, there was a time when a child's name was not heard publicly until the ceremony. Our old prayer book (1928) says,

Then the Minister shall take the Child into his hands,
and say to the Godfathers and Godmothers, "Name this Child."

Of course, the name spoken aloud at the water's edge – the font – was a personal family name – Henry, Grace, William, Sarah, etc. Jesus was a family-given name, too. But as it was with him, so, too, it is with us: We also share a name with the broader human family, equally bestowed upon us all by our creator: Our *true* name is Beloved of God.

We have little word on how Jesus contemplated these things or managed the enormity of his experience, psychologically or emotionally. What we *do* know is that John's public ministry caught his attention, and, with baptism as his first intentional step, he crossed the threshold from *perceiving* his call to living *into* it. That is Baptism. He would have to imagine the path, figure out his steps, and somehow, against the powerful forces that would work against him, try to remain faithful to the path of justice, mercy, and peace, holding to the perfect Way of divine Love in a very imperfect human world

And we, of course, are called to do the same.

But…. human as we are, we will sometimes lack the courage to follow that Way and find ourselves unwilling to tolerate the cost of our own discipleship – personally, politically, materially, and spiritually. What's more, we may find it difficult to believe that any gifts we bear can make any real difference in these troubled times.

But especially *in* such times like these, we should take a moment to remember why we chose baptism in the first place, and whether it matters that we made and confirmed those sacred promises, the same ones we repeat every time we witness a baptism to this day:

…to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourself;
and to strive for justice and peace among all people,
respecting the dignity of every human being.

In other words…*it is proper in this way for us to fulfill all righteousness.*

In a season which opens with wise ones following a star and bearing gifts for a holy child, let us remember who *we* have vowed to follow, and the gifts *we* might bear for the sake of *all* children, who deserve a world which honors *them* as holy…

…and let us remember, too, that by virtue of our baptism, no matter what we are *called*, our true name is *Beloved of God.*

If only we believed it. If only we would treat one another as *if* we really believed it.

Amen.