

Matthew 3:13-17
Saint Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights
11 January 2026
The Rev'd T.J. Freeman

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

In nomine...

Our world is facing a crisis of compassion. Everywhere we look there is murder and war and hate. The numbers of those who are poor and hungry are increasing. As are the numbers of those who cannot afford healthcare or necessities – those who fear for their personal safety. Mass shootings continue at an alarming rate. Antisemitism is rampant, just yesterday a friend texted to say that the synagogue across the street from her church was set on fire. The militarization of federal law enforcement and local police has led to distrust and fear and death. War continues to rage in Ukraine, Sudan, the Holy Land. And the leaders of the nations seem deaf to the cries of those who are suffering and those who care for them. Very little is changing, at least for the better.

Had we been on the banks of the River Jordan two thousand years ago we would have experienced a people lamenting many of the same issues that we are facing today. Hunger. War. Strive. Political uncertainty. Othering of the least, the lost, and the left behind. We humans it seems very rarely choose the way of compassion, when the way of power and personal safety is an option.

Had we been there on the banks of the River Jordan we would have encountered a man who would probably seem quite strange to us. Dirty. Argumentative. Singularly driven. And yet, his preaching drew crowds from across the region. He told those who heard him, that they were sinful and in need of repentance because the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. In response more and more people came, repenting of their sins and being baptized.

At the height of John's power and appeal in walks Jesus. And rather than strive to keep power for himself, John desires to fall at the feet of Jesus and worship him, he desires to receive the baptism of Holy Spirit and fire, but Jesus prevents him from doing so. Jesus takes the Baptist by the hands, looks lovingly into his eyes, and implores him to let the roles be reversed for just this moment, saying “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” To our modern sensibilities it is a scandal. A scandal that someone with authority and a following would point away from himself. A scandal that someone who others desire to follow, so clearly expresses his desire to follow someone else. A scandal that one who is without sin, comes seeking a baptism of repentance.

There is much and more to say about the baptism of our Lord and about John the Baptist, but what I want us to see today is the power of humility and compassion. The Baptist is a model in humility, as is Jesus. Both of them recognize the truth about God and the truth about humanity.

Jesus in seeking the baptism of John is showing to us the value of compassion. He did not need to repent, but we do. And loving us he commits to the fullness of our experience. Birth, life, suffering, joy, sorrow, pleasure, and ultimately death. There is nothing about our fragile existence that Jesus is unwilling to bear with us. Nothing. Jesus

knows the depths of every aspect of our lives. He knows the temptations of power, wealth, and greed. Yet, he shows us that we need not give in. That we have in ourselves the power to resist and when we do fail, he will compassionately hear our repentance and welcome us home.

Today as we mark the Baptism of our Lord, we will bring new members into the Body of Christ, and we will join with them by renewing our Baptismal Covenant. We will renew our promise to continue in the apostle's teaching and fellowship. We will renew our promise to resist evil and when we fail, to repent and return to the Lord. We will renew our promise to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. We will renew our promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. We will renew our promise to strive for justice and peace and to respect the dignity of every human being.

This way of life will not make us rich or famous or perhaps even terribly popular, but it will make us humble and compassionate—and that is truly what the world needs from us. Because things are bleak and we must not abandon our call to be bearers of the light. The world needs us. The murdered at Bondi Beach need us. Renee Good needs us. Those who worship at Beth Israel Congregation in Jackson, Mississippi need us. Those who do not know where their next meal is coming from need us. Those who die forgotten and ignored beneath the rubble need us. The world needs us. Our siblings need us.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon us the forgiveness of sin, and have raised us to the new life of grace. Sustain us, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. Amen.