FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

"MARKED BY PROMISE, NOT PERFORMANCE"

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 3: 13-17

This sermon was preached by The. Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling on Sunday, January 11, 2026 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Matthew 3: 13-17

The Baptism of Jesus

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 he 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."*

Marked by Promise, Not Performance

Leader: The word of the Lord.
People: Thanks be to God.

There are certain words and actions that, through repetition, have a way of shaping us—like how a familiar tune settles in our spirits or how a path becomes well worn because we use it and know where it goes. The church has its own well-worn paths, certain holy and familiar patterns shaped not by habit alone, but by grace, and baptism is one of them.

If you read this week's *Kirk News*, you will have noticed that we have five baptisms scheduled for January. And because of the frequency with which we celebrate baptisms, many of us know the liturgy quite well. Some of us could probably recite portions of it by heart, and that repetition is not a weakness of the church. In fact, I would argue that it is one of our greatest strengths, because at a basic level, such blessed familiarity can breed trust. When it comes to baptism, from the earliest days of the Christian church—long before sanctuaries were built or bulletins were printed—followers of Jesus gathered around water and God's name, trusting that God was at work in and through this seemingly ordinary act.

This past week, I had the opportunity to chat with Caroline and Ben as we prepared for their son Jack's baptism. We do this with every family that brings their child to the font, and our conversations usually range from logistics to theology and everything in between. Each time I have one of those meetings, I am reminded just how important it is that we take time to go over such things, not only for parents and pastors, but for entire church families. Remembering with some regularity what God is doing in baptism is a very good thing.

Perhaps one of the best times to do that is today, because every year, on the Sunday immediately following Epiphany, the church at large celebrates the Baptism of Jesus. On this day, as regular and predictable as it may be, we once again ask questions as old as the church itself: Why do we baptize? What is happening when someone is baptized? And perhaps the most pressing question on this particular Sunday: Why was Jesus baptized?

The answer to that first question is simple. We baptize because Jesus told us to baptize. At the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus commands his disciples to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of

the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And so that is what Christ's church has done ever since. If we were to visit churches across the Charleston peninsula this morning, we would find that some people were baptized as infants while others were baptized as adults. Some were baptized by immersion, while for others, pouring or sprinkling was the mode of distributing the water. All of those differences matter, and we need not pretend they do not. But beneath these varied practices lies a shared confession: that baptism, with water and in the name of the Triune God, is fundamentally God's act, not ours.

This point is essential, because at the end of the day, baptism is not about the quantity of the water or the age of the person being baptized. As the apostle Paul reminds us, "There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism." If we are going to understand that one baptism as good Reformed Christians, we must begin with the broader framework of God's covenants. Long before baptism was instituted, God was already marking his covenant people with a visible sign.

In ancient times, as recorded in the Old Testament, that sign was circumcision. In our reading from Genesis 21, we heard that Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old. That act was not merely cultural or private; it was deeply theological, because God had commanded it. By God's decree, circumcision was the public sign that Isaac belonged to God. Abraham was declaring to his household and to the world that he and Sarah were stewards of Isaac's life, entrusted for what parents know all too well is a precious and brief amount of time.

In this way, God set Isaac apart by grace. He was claimed by God's covenant and counted among God's people, not because he demonstrated faith or obedience—he was only eight days old—but because God keeps his promises. Neither Isaac's adoption nor our own is based on performance. God still keeps his promises, which is why we celebrate the baptism of infants, the New Testament parallel to the Old Testament covenant of circumcision. Like Abraham before us, when we bring our children to the waters of baptism, we bear witness to the priority of God's grace and profess that God's love claims us long before we can respond in faith. This is not a denial of the necessity of faith; it is a recognition of its source, because faith itself is a gift of grace.

Scripture is clear that we are not saved by our works, our pedigree, or our moral achievements. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. And we all need saving, even our children. I doubt any of us looked at Jack this morning and thought he was in desperate need of forgiveness. He appears innocent, full of life, untouched by the troubles of the world. And yet Scripture also teaches that sin is a universal human condition. We do not need to teach children to be selfish or unkind; those tendencies emerge quite naturally. As someone once said, "We believe in total depravity, and we practice it daily." The prophet Isaiah put it this way: "All we like sheep have gone astray." Baptism confronts us with this sobering truth: every single one of us is in need of God's grace.

That brings us to the unavoidable question: if baptism is connected to repentance and forgiveness, why was Jesus baptized? To understand why, we return to that foundational truth: baptism is not something we do; it is something God does. Everything Jesus did, he did not for himself, but for us. He had no sins to confess and no need to repent. When he stepped into the waters of the Jordan River, he did so not because he needed baptism, but because we need baptism.

Picture the scene: crowds gathering at the river, confessing their sins, John baptizing them, symbolically washing their sins into the water. Then Jesus steps forward and is baptized with the very water into which those sins had been washed. In a deeply theological and symbolic sense, the sinless Son of God was baptized with sin-polluted water. Before Jesus preached a sermon or performed a miracle, the gospel was already being proclaimed and enacted. Jesus stepped into the place of sinners. This pattern is consistent with the incarnation itself: God did not remain distant. He entered our condition, took on our flesh, and bore our burdens.

Jesus understood that his baptism was only the beginning. He would later say, "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed." In this way, the waters of his baptism pointed toward the blood of the cross. His baptism was a sign and seal of what he would one day fully endure on Calvary. This is why pastors sometimes say at the time of a person's passing that their baptism is now complete in death. Just as Jesus was baptized into our sin, we are baptized into his righteousness and into his victory over sin and death.

When Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were torn open, the Spirit descended like a dove, and a voice from heaven declared, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." These words were spoken not after a lifetime of ministry, miracles, or sacrifice, but at the very beginning. Being beloved is not a reward for achievement; it is a declaration of identity. In baptism, God speaks before we act and names us before we respond.

Scripture calls this adoption. To be adopted is to be chosen, given a name, a place, and a future grounded not in merit, but in love. Jesus knew something of adoption. Though Joseph was not his biological father, he never ceased to be his father. Through Joseph's lineage, Jesus was recognized as heir to David's throne. Biology was not the determining factor; covenant and calling were. Through Christ, we too are adopted into God's family. We are not merely forgiven; we are welcomed, claimed, and called by name. In baptism, God speaks the same words over us: "You are my beloved child."

Just as baptism marked the beginning of Jesus' ministry, it marks a beginning for us as well. In baptism, God places a claim on our lives and sets us on a path best walked in community. Baptism is never a private act, even when it involves a single person, because faith is nurtured in community. Baptism works the way the gospel works: it does not coerce belief or bypass faith, but it names the space in which faith grows. Long after the water has dried, baptism continues to testify to God's grace, both when our faith is strong and when it is weak.

Martin Luther described the Christian life as a daily return to baptism—not being baptized again, but continually trusting the promises baptism makes, namely that we belong to God. Every baptism calls us back to repentance and to faith, not as heroic effort, but as humble reception of God's promises.

And so, we return to where we began. Year after year, sometimes week after week, we gather around the same font, hear the same words, and trust the same promise. The path may feel familiar and well worn, but that is not a sign that baptism has lost its power. Today, as we remember the baptism of Jesus and celebrate Jack's baptism, we are reminded that everything begins with grace: a grace that claims us before we can respond, calls us beloved before we have done anything to deserve it, and sets us on a path marked by promise, not performance. Thanks be to God, this is a grace that will not let us go and will one day lead us home.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.