

Mark 1:1-11

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

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Stepping into the Jordan with Jesus

I was 12 years old at Lakeside Baptist Church. Dressed in a white gown, being “dunked” by the pastor and coming out of the water feeling the obvious presence of cold air I was freezing! But who doesn’t enjoy a good baptism?

Today, much of the church around the globe will be talking about the baptism of Jesus. The first question that comes to my mind is “Why?” I mean, we can all see why I needed to be baptized! But Jesus?

And why in the Jordan River of all places? Muddy water, fed by the snowmelt of Mt. Hermon. I remember seeing the Jordan for the first time thinking why would anyone get baptized in this muddy water? It doesn’t square with the pristine images I grew up with as a child.

John the Baptist was an odd one, known for wearing camel's hair clothing with a leather belt and subsisting on locusts and wild honey. He baptized people in the Jordan River as a sign of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, urging them to confess.

But don’t miss this. He was also the herald of something much larger: the imminent arrival of the reign of God and a new way of organizing the world. This new order stood in stark contrast to the Roman Empire, characterized by violence, coercion, acquisition, inequality, and injustice. John is inviting people into a new imagination for a new world.

Perhaps our first indication of this? The dove. Why is this important?

In ancient Roman religion, augury involved interpreting omens from the behavior of birds, a practice known as "taking the auspices."

Mark's Gospel, written in Rome during the late 60s or 70s AD, presents a subversive message: the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus not as an eagle — the emblem of Roman imperial power — but as a dove, symbolizing peace and divine approval. This contrast would have been striking to Roman readers, highlighting a divergence from the values of the Empire.

That Jesus was identified as God's beloved son by a dove and not an eagle is instructive, deeply subversive, and absolutely beautiful. The reign of God inaugurated by Jesus is not the empire of Caesar, but the peaceable kingdom of Jesus.

John the Baptist is calling his converts and calling us to a singular allegiance, and it's not to a flag with its violence, war mongering, and injustices. But to the reign of God in the world marked by love, mercy, forgiveness, and above all else, self-sacrificial love.

One of the most radical things about the Christian faith is that it subordinates security, which is the obsession of Empire, to love of God, love of neighbor, and even love of enemy. In the philosophy of Empire, nothing, and I mean nothing, is more sacred than security; but the reign of God has different priorities. They might get you killed. Like it did Jesus.

We follow the King whose symbol is a dove, not an eagle, who comes in on a donkey not a war horse, who is depicted as a lamb, and not a lion. Our baptismal identity demands we take up his agenda, always. An agenda of love.

The question remains: Why was Jesus being baptized into his own movement? Because his movement involves standing in solidarity with all that needs to be repented of, and repentance is not merely from personal mistakes. It is from complicity in the system of empire. Complicity that one cannot avoid when sin is thought of not only as personal peccadilloes but systemic and structural.

This is why not everyone gathered by the Jordan stepped into the water with John. The religious professionals interested in maintaining the status quo that profited them with power and privilege would have none of this baptism. Sure, they would be people who would go to great lengths to repent of personal sin, and fastidious law-keeping. In their mind, repentance is what OTHER people needed to do. Sex workers. Tax collectors. Thieves. Adulterers. Drunkards.

But Jesus upsets everything by traveling all the way from Nazareth to step into that river. It was a scandalous act.

How can Jesus, the sinless one, be baptized for repentance? Look closely at the most common prayer of confession utilized in almost all ancient liturgies. "*We* pray most merciful God. *We* confess that *We* have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed."

Jesus joins the human race and is willing to pray "we confess *we* have sinned'. Because in the great systems of sin, we can't always pin things on any one person. But the systems of oppression are there, and cause suffering and injustice on an insidious scale.

Dismantling them involves all of us saying "We have done this. We have participated in this. We breathe this air. We are caught up in it. We together must seek to dismantle this." And it begins with repentance.

I've been talking a lot about what we must "do." Yes, you must step into the Jordan with Jesus.

But I want you to know that this is about *receiving*. About your being receptive to hearing the same words spoken over Jesus spoken over you. Jesus hears from heaven: ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

You, Bob, You Jodi, You Susan, You Jeanette, You Brissa, You Steve, You Mary Jo, You Jeff, You Mark ... say your name and hear: “You are my child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Because friends, it is as we follow Jesus into the Jordan that our ears are cleaned out and we can finally hear the words that have been spoken over us for eternity. You are the object of God’s affection, which is why you have a soul, for you to receive the affections of God into your life. Your purpose from here on is to explore your belovedness to God. And it’s a gift to grow into over time.

And before you have done anything to look good, to look better, to keep the approval coming. God’s attitude toward you, the unshakeable affection which God has for you, which is the core of your identity, is beloved. You are the beloved child of God.

Don’t you know this is a moment Jesus carried with him throughout his life? Don’t you know when he was mocked, when he was laughed at, when he was doubted, when he was betrayed, when he was alone, these words came ringing into this soul: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” And these are the words we need to ring into our soul as we live in this midst of the crises that we confront as we continue on in 2025.

Because the Spirit that declares we are God’s beloved is the Spirit of Advocacy. You advocate for those that don’t have a voice, for those that are oppressed, for the weak, the disenfranchised. Not a Spirit of accusation, that’s the voice of another spirit altogether. But of advocacy.

Friends if we are going to stand with Jesus

- It’s in the waters of repentance, not on the bank in judgment.
- It’s in the waters of advocacy, not on the bank of accusation.
- It is in waters of humility, not on the bank of pride.
- It is in the waters of the Reign of God, not on the bank of nationalism and oppression.

I invite you as I challenge myself to step into those waters and at least begin the process by saying “I don’t have all the answers to systemic injustice but I start with humility. I start with repentance, I start with not making excuses, I start with prayer to a merciful God who loves me and calls me to something higher than my complacency, self-satisfaction, and affluence.”

We are baptized into the word made flesh. Why? So that you, so that we, might become the flesh made word. So you, so we, might become an agent of what you’ve received, God’s agent of grace and acceptance and forgiveness and mercy. Amen.