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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

January 11, 2026

First Sunday after Epiphany, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

Isaiah 42:1-9

Psalm 29

Acts 10:34-43

Matthew 3:13-17

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One of the many reasons I love living in Sonoma County is that the ocean is nearby. It's not that I go there that often. It's just knowing it's there; crashing; rugged; eternal. Our ocean is cold and fierce and wild. It makes me think of the line from the hymn "St. Patrick's Breastplate": "the deep salt sea around the old eternal rocks."

Water is the primeval element. The book of Genesis pictures the beginning of creation as a formless void, empty but for a vast dark ocean of water. Water, somehow, even before everything else is created, the only thing that exists other than God. Water as primordial chaos, with a wind from God, or the Spirit of God—for in Hebrew and Greek *wind* and *spirit* are the very same word—sweeping to and fro over the waters.

And today we hear of Jesus coming to the waters. John, himself an agent of chaos, a wild man, has appeared at the Jordan River preaching a baptism of repentance. That's how Matthew's Gospel describes it: the baptism of John has to do with repentance. So surely if there is anyone who *doesn't* need this baptism, it's the sinless one, Jesus. But Jesus willingly asks to be baptized anyway, to plunge into the roiling waters, to close his eyes and let his head slip beneath the waves.

And the eternal God, the changeless God, puts aside the perfect safety of Godhood to plunge into the messiness of a world that is not God.

Consider God before creation: timeless, changeless, eternally existing in idealized Platonic splendor. That's a pretty safe picture. Not messy. Simple. Pristine. But there's no story to it. God chose story; God chose to create something that wasn't God, something finite, varied, and splendid, a universe full of stars, rocks, water, and living beings. And then came the Incarnation: God choosing not just to create that universe and to love it, but actually to become part of it as a human being. And now today on the Sunday after Epiphany we see God entering in even more deeply into the whole depths of our human condition, broken and alienated as it is, by choosing the baptism of John, as the sinless one chooses to be identified as one of us sinful humans even though he doesn't need to.

Back in the 90s when I lived in Georgia some friends introduced me to the Southern comedian Jeff Foxworthy, who was famous for his "You Might Be a Redneck" routines. I remember him saying, "People say, 'Bill is a great friend. You know, he'd get up at 3 a.m. to go bail you out of jail.' Which I never understood because if Bill was really such a great friend his butt would be in jail with you!"

Jesus decided to get in here with us. So much so that he abandons all safety and dives into our suffering, our pain, our confusion. Even, eventually, to the point of a shameful death on the cross. And after being raised from death he still shows the marks. In Luke's and John's gospels when he appears to his friends he shows them the scars in his hands and feet and side—wounds that the glory of the resurrection has transformed, but not erased. In some way perhaps even God's own self is affected by this entry into human existence and suffering, forever identified with the unpredictability and pain of creation in the most intimate way. Our sorrows are God's sorrows, because our life is God's life.

Today in Minneapolis a young family is mourning the death of Renee Good at the hands of law enforcement. There are many things to say about what happened, about a violent society and the militarization of policing and the use of federal immigration agents with the explicit intent of sowing fear in liberal cities. But for today I want to stay simply with the sorrow of that one family, a sorrow known by everyone around the world who has ever lost a beloved, a sorrow known by Mary at the cross; a sorrow that deserves to be honored even by those who might be on another side politically, that deserves to be named as tragedy rather than berated and ridiculed as some of our leaders have done. The violent death of a loved one is one of the worst sorrows we humans know. Some of you here today may have known it. And even if we avoid that particular tragedy, or the other more spectacular tragedies of war or famine or early life-shortening disease, none of us will exit this life without some acquaintance with grief. It's part of the human condition. But we'd certainly rather avoid it if we can.

And in a prosperous society we can often do so with some success. Not everyone can. There are those whose lives or livelihoods are always on the edge of danger. But there are also many of us who are used to at least some of the privileges that insulate us from discomfort, danger, and loss. We hold the messy uncontrollability of reality at arm's length. We lock our doors and put up fences and retreat from one another. But today in the baptism of Jesus we see a God who does something else: who sees danger and runs toward it, who jumps into the roiling seas with us so we might not be abandoned.

Most of us here today have been baptized in his name in our own turn. If you haven't been baptized, I invite you to seek it, to hear the call of Jesus to join him on his way. But it's not a small step or an easy journey. To be baptized into Christ is to be plunged into those powerful waters and come up with our identities forever changed. When we are baptized into Jesus, we become little Jesuses ourselves—not sinless, but growing ever more like Jesus as God's Holy Spirit works in us. Freed from the need to seek safety for ourselves, because in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead we have the only safety we can ever need from death and sin and evil itself.

And commissioned to join Jesus in loving God's messy and beautiful creation: a creation so beautiful in God's eyes that we were worth diving in for.