

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Baptism of Our Lord
January 11, 2026
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
Christ's baptism fulfills all righteousness

—Matthew 3:13-17

The First Sunday after Epiphany is called “Baptism of Our Lord” Sunday, and how special it is that we can celebrate this Sunday when we have a baptism in each of our services this morning! Our Gospel today is short and sweet and well known: the account of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River. It’s a beautiful text that illustrates all the power of God in Christ at work to forgive and to save sinners.

Let’s start this morning by reviewing a couple of key concepts. The first key concept is that in God’s plan of salvation there are things that are universal (things that apply to the whole world), and there are things that are personal (things that apply to each one of us individually). Jesus is the Savior of the whole world; Jesus died for everybody. Nobody is left out. Those are universal truths. Then there are personal truths: Repent and believe the good news! Be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:16). Those are individual invitations, extended person by person. Jesus died for everyone, but the blessings of his salvation for everyone are distributed to people individually through the preaching of the Word and through the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. Universal for all, individual to each person.

When we are feeling downcast, struggling with depression, feeling unloved or burdened with guilt, we usually emphasize the universal truths: God loves you because God loves everyone. Jesus died for you and took away your sins because Jesus died for everyone. Don’t let your dark emotions mislead you; don’t let Satan overwhelm you with guilt. Hold onto these universal truths. But then there are the personal truths that apply individually, and the truth we apply is going to depend on our individual attitude. When someone is repentant and hungry for forgiveness, we will share the Good News. You are baptized into Christ. You have been adopted as God’s child. You are forgiven. On the other hand, when someone is feeling arrogant or self-righteous or has a complacent attitude toward sin, we will share the Law: Repent! Turn away from sin and turn to Jesus. When you’re living in sin or continuing in sin, don’t think you can make everything good by saying, “Jesus died for me!” Repent, because Jesus says that unless you repent you’ll perish (Luke 13:3,5). So here’s key concept number one: Universal truths versus personal appropriation of those truths.

The second key concept centers around what Jesus did for us when he came to save us. To start with, let’s emphasize two things Jesus did: He lived for you, and he died for you. We tend to zero in on Jesus dying for us because that’s when Jesus paid for our sins with his blood. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 2:2). He washed our sins away to forgive us and to cleanse us. But don’t forget that for 33 years before he died on the cross Jesus *lived* for you. He was born under the law (Galatians 4:4), so that he could be obedient to the law and keep the Commandments. He was tempted in every way, just as we are, yet he did not sin (Hebrews 4:15). He fulfilled all righteousness by satisfying all the demands of God’s law.

Both Jesus’ living for us (we call that his “active obedience”) and his dying for us (we call that his “passive obedience” or “passion”) are important. Let me explain why. If you ask just about anyone who knows anything about Christianity how God forgives our sins, they will say, “Jesus died for my sins. God forgave my sins and gave me a clean slate.” But Jesus’ forgiveness isn’t enough to get you into heaven. Jesus said, “Unless your *righteousness* surpasses that of the Pharisees and experts in the law, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20), and Jesus says, “Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Being forgiven is not enough to get into heaven! Yes, that cancels your debt and zeroes your balance, but to get into heaven you need to be a good person, a righteous person, a *perfect* person—otherwise there is no heaven for you. So how do you become a good person in God’s eyes? By starting fresh and building a new life on the clean slate Jesus gave you? No! By following Jesus’ teachings and loving your neighbor? No. By your own efforts to be good, righteous and perfect? No! You are counted righteous before God, you are considered a good person, a *perfect* person in the eyes of God because Jesus lived for you and Jesus’ perfection is credited to you. Jesus not only cleans the slate and wipes away the debt of sin; he gives us his own obedience, and it’s counted as yours. Simply trusting in Jesus as your Savior, you have forgiveness of sins. Simply trusting in Jesus as our Savior, you have righteousness from God. This is the heart of the good news, the gospel: “For in the gospel a righteousness from God has been revealed that is by faith from first to last. The righteous will live by faith” (Romans 1:17). “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Romans 3:22). “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Here’s key concept number two: Jesus lived for us to become our righteousness, and he died for us to become sin for us and take our sin away.

Now, in this short, sweet text from Matthew, all of these things are playing out as Jesus comes to the Jordan River to be baptized by John the Baptist. John has been preaching, calling people to repent, and baptizing with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Then Jesus comes to be baptized. John is surprised at Jesus' request and tries to stop him. Jesus doesn't have any sins to repent of. He doesn't need forgiveness. *But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, because it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then John let him.* Jesus wasn't baptized for his own forgiveness. He was baptized for *you* and for *your* forgiveness! Remember that Jesus—in everything he does, whether it's obeying his earthly parents, or fighting against Satan's temptations, being a model citizen and paying his taxes, or gathering his disciples, or showing kindness to the poor and maimed and crippled and blind and leprous—is our substitute. Jesus is our proxy, our stand-in. Everything he does is to fulfill all righteousness to become *your* righteousness.

Now let's apply this to you as a Christian: It is because of Jesus' baptism that your baptism has power. Scripture says, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ" (Galatians 2:27). When you were baptized you were clothed with Christ. In baptism today, little Vivian and little Ronan were clothed with Christ. With Christ's righteousness! When Jesus comes out of the Jordan River, God the Father speaks from heaven and says, *"This is my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with him."* And if God the Father is pleased with Christ, then God the Father is pleased with you, who are in Christ.

But there's more. Jesus' baptism at the Jordan River marks the beginning of his public ministry. He has always been the Son of God, but now he is going out publicly to serve. And there is something very important that the Bible teaches about anyone who teaches or preaches in the name of God: He must be *called* by God into the ministry. In the book of Hebrews it says, "No one takes this honor [of being a priest] on himself. He must be called by God" (Hebrews 5:4). The call into ministry is not a feeling or some internal urge. The call into ministry is actually extended by God. There is so much confusion about this today. Somebody wakes up and decides, "I think I'll be a pastor or teacher today," and they hang out a shingle and proclaim themselves to be a prophet and start their own church—and it is completely disorderly, not at all the way Jesus established his church. Do you remember how Jesus called his disciples? He said to his first disciples, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). Then he later designated them as apostles and conferred on them the authority to act as apostles (Matthew 10). Jesus told them, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). Your pastors at Emmanuel didn't just show up here one day and say, "I'm here to be your pastor." Pastor Pautz, Pastor Pufahl, and I were called by Christ through his church. On this Tuesday we will extend another call to a man to serve as pastor here, and we pray that he will hear in that call the voice of Jesus and be moved to accept the call.

Even Jesus—the Son of God himself!—did not begin his ministry without a divine call. He didn't wake up one day and say, "I think I'll go be a rabbi and preach and teach." God called him. At his baptism he was very publicly called to begin his ministry. The heavens were opened, and the Spirit of God descended on him. Scripture says, "God *anointed* Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power" (Acts 10:38). Anointing was a public way of showing that the person anointed had been given authority; the person was not just acting of his own volition but with authority from God. This is just one more way that Jesus fulfilled all righteousness, as he began his public ministry.

So what's our application for Monday morning? We all want something from our sermons that we can hold onto and take with us into the week. It's a New Year. How does this help us enter the New Year? That's a fair question! Well, when you get up tomorrow, wake up and get out of bed and remember, "I'm a baptized child of God!" Whatever temptations Satan and the world around you throw at you, remember, "I'm a baptized child of God!" and let your baptism be your breastplate of righteousness that wards off ungodly attacks. When you're tempted to do something sinful, remember, "I'm a baptized child of God!" and don't stoop down from your high calling to dirty yourself with something unworthy of your calling as a Christian. Whenever you feel down or discouraged or downright depressed, remember, "I'm a baptized child of God!" God has elevated you and given you the highest honor a human soul can possess. He has crowned you with his love, wrapped you up in Jesus, dressed you in Christ's righteousness. When you feel anxious or afraid, take heart! Your sins are forgiven! You are baptized into Christ. When people want to rip on you, say bad things about you, tear you down, remember your identity and say, "I am baptized into Christ." Nothing that anyone can say or do to you can take away from who you are in Jesus. When people try to hurt you, just remember that they cannot take from you what God himself has given you: Your baptism, your new self in Jesus, and all the blessings it brings. Amen.