

New Beginnings

January is a time of new beginnings. Each year, people make New Year's resolutions – and I bet many of them have already been broken! The season after Epiphany gives us an opportunity to think about and reflect on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Each year in early January, we read Gospel accounts about the Baptism of Jesus. I've always been fascinated with Jesus' baptism. His baptism is the starting point of His public ministry. It was a pivotal moment for Him, going from being a carpenter, as far as we know – to being a traveling teacher and preacher. If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 3:15-17, 21-22. **Read Luke 3:15-17, 21-22.**

Luke records that “The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah,” (Luke 3:15). Have you ever experienced expectancy or anticipation? Our kids experienced anticipation a couple weeks ago – seeing gifts starting to pile up under the Christmas tree – they could barely wait to open them! That's exactly how the Jews were feeling when the events surrounding Jesus' baptism occurred.

They were anticipating the Messiah. They were eager to meet Him. They held the belief that the Messiah would usher in a golden age for the Jewish people – a restoration of all the greatness of the Kingdom of Israel from the days of King Solomon. They had been waiting a long time – Isaiah predicted His coming about 750 years prior to Jesus' birth in Bethlehem.

Expectation and Anticipation

To be clear, some day Jesus is going to return, and He will usher in a golden age the likes of which the world hasn't seen since before Adam and Eve disobeyed the Lord in the Garden of Eden. The Jewish people were longing for hope and salvation. They wanted deliverance from Roman rule. Their expectations of what Messiah ought to be were shaped by their immediate circumstances.

Some of them listened to John the Baptist, and apparently started to think maybe he was the Messiah. So he redirects their hopes beyond their immediate desires, to focus on the spiritual and eternal. He tells them all:

I baptize you with water. But One who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand to clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire, (verses 16-17).

We, too, live in a time of anxious expectation. In our fast-paced world, we often seek quick fixes for deep issues – whether those are personal struggles, injustice in society, or global crises. John’s message continues to resonate today: the ultimate answer is found in the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire. The answer to all our problems is the One who transforms us from within – Jesus Christ. This expectation calls us to surrender, much like the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer states: “I am no longer my own, but Thine. Put me to what Thou wilt, rank me with whom Thou wilt.”¹

To live in expectation – anticipation – of Jesus Christ, is to release control, and trust that God’s plans are by far better than our own. John points out the distinction between his baptism of water for repentance, and the greater baptism which Jesus brings – a baptism of the Spirit that purifies, empowers, and refines. His use of fire as an image is significant. Out of control, fire destroys many things. We’ve seen it on the news this week, many people out in California have lost their homes because of the wildfire around Los Angeles. Fire can also be useful. It destroys impurities, and in those old growth forests, it also clears and cleans the land to start new life.

Not Based on Works, But on Relationship

Similarly, the Holy Spirit transforms us, burning away sin and self-centeredness while igniting a passion for God’s kingdom. The refining process echoes the commitment found in Wesley’s prayer. “Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by Thee or laid aside for Thee, exalted for Thee or brought low for Thee.”² These words are not easy for us to pray. They reflect a willingness to undergo the “fire” of transformation, trusting God to shape us into vessels for His purposes. Our baptism, then, isn’t a once-and-done event; but rather it’s a life-long process of sanctification. It’s a call to be continually renewed and refined by the fire of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit’s work isn’t always comfortable, but it’s necessary. Consider the refining fire of challenges in your own life. Have you ever faced a season of hardship that drew you closer to God? Those moments, painful as they may be or may have been, shape us into vessels who bring God glory. Through the Spirit, we’re empowered to live out our faith boldly, bearing fruit that reflects God’s kingdom.

The imagery of the winnowing fork reminds us that living out our baptismal covenant involves a process of separation. We have to be willing to let go of the “chaff” in our lives, and allow the Spirit to cultivate what’s good and fruitful. It requires a daily decision to align our priorities, values, and actions with God’s kingdom. Wesley’s prayer challenges us to live with open hands, ready to be “employed,” or “laid aside”

¹ The Wesleyan Covenant Prayer, at <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/blog/the-wesley-covenant-prayer-and-the-baptismal-covenant>, accessed 1/10/2025.

² Ibid.

according to God's will. We're called to trust God – and that He's going to continue to take great care of us.

“When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as He was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are My Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased,’” (verses 21-22), we hear from Luke at the end of our passage this morning. This is what's so amazing to me. Jesus' baptism is a moment when we see God's divine affirmation of Christ. Before Jesus performs a single miracle or preaches a single sermon, the Father declares His love and approval for Jesus. It's an affirmation that's not based on anything Jesus has done – but on who He is – the beloved Son of God. It's about the relationship between the Father and the Son.

Best Of All Is, God Is With Us

We do things backwards at times – and I'm speaking from experience here. I don't regularly affirm or say positive stuff to my girls – I just expect them to do great things. It boils down to me taking them for granted. And Kendra, too. Friends, don't ever think that the person behind this pulpit is somehow greater than you are – pastors are human beings, too!

As long as we're in these bodies, we're all capable of making mistakes and not having things right. Here's another example. If you look at the education system in our country, teachers all over do this. They wait for a kid to do something spectacular before they say anything positive to them – or sometimes it's the other way around – they only say something when they've done something wrong, and then rake them over the coals. Why do we do that? Every person, no matter how flawed, has been made in the image of Almighty God – and we ought to treat them that way. It makes you think twice about what you think about someone, looking at them through that lens, doesn't it?

We need to be focused more on the positive things. God's doing great things all around us. And He loves us, and everyone else, too. Our baptismal covenant echoes this truth.

In baptism, we are claimed by God – like He says in Isaiah, “I have called you by name; you are Mine,” (Isa. 43:1). He claims us not because of our achievements and accomplishments – but because of His grace. He calls us His children, we're co-heirs with Christ (Rom.8:17), the Apostle Paul writes. One of the most famous statements of John Wesley was made on his deathbed. He said, “Best of all is, God is with us.” God's always present. And we're called to live in the assurance of His love, and the power of His Spirit.

Wesleyan Covenant Prayer

Our identity, though, also carries a responsibility. This is where the rubber meets the road. Just as Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of His public ministry, our baptism calls us to participate in God's work in the world. To do that, we have to be willing to say with John Wesley, "I freely and heartily yield all things to Thy pleasure and disposal."³ To be beloved children of God is both a gift and a calling. It's an invitation for us to live in a way that reflects God's love, grace, and justice, trusting in His good pleasure and purpose for our lives.

As we think about Jesus' baptism and what baptism means for our lives, I'd like to invite you to renew your commitment to God, first through the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer, and later, through the Congregational Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant. Wesley's prayer invites us to respond to God's grace with humility, trust, and obedience. Wesley adapted this prayer from church traditions which were important to his parents. It shaped his theology and preaching. Take a moment to pray these words from your heart:

I am no longer my own, but Thine.
Put me to what Thou wilt, rank me with whom Thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed by Thee or laid aside for Thee.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things
to Thy pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
Thou art mine, and I am Thine. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.⁴

The baptism of Jesus Christ invites us to think about our own baptismal identity and calling. It reminds us that we are beloved children of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and called to live for His purposes. In this new year of 2025, I pray that we renew our commitment to live as disciples of Jesus Christ – trusting in His grace to sustain and guide us, even as we allow Him to work through us, for the transformation of the world!

Prayer: God of grace and glory, You call us with Your voice of flame to be Your people, faithful and courageous. As Your beloved Son embraced His mission in the waters of baptism, inspire us with the fire of Your Spirit to join in His transforming work. We ask this in the name of our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns forever. Amen.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.