

## Sermon for Epiphany II 2026

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

Two thousand years ago in the wilderness east of Jerusalem, an itinerant preacher began to call all who would listen to repentance and baptism. John the Baptist, clothed in camel's hair and living off the land, had none of the wealth or status of the religious elites, yet his call to repentance spread rapidly through the Jewish people. St. Mark tells us "All the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were *all* baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins." Some of those who joined John's movement expected him to be the promised Messiah or "anointed one," translated in Greek as "Christ." The Jews had hoped for the Messiah's coming for hundreds of years, expecting the Son of David to come and deliver his people. John, however, deflected their attention from himself to another, whom he described as "One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose." John fulfilled a particular prophetic role: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'" And, when the Lord's way was prepared in the hearts of the people, he came directly to John to be baptized himself.

Unlike the others who came to be baptized, Jesus did not come to be washed from sins. And, uniquely, his baptism was accompanied by an extraordinary revelation. As St. Mark describes, "Immediately, coming up

from the water, he saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove. Then a voice came from heaven, ‘You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’” There is a lot going on here. First, at his baptism, the nature and identity of Jesus were revealed. Here the full Trinity was manifested – Father, Son, and Spirit. Second, this baptism of Jesus inaugurated a new baptism. As the second-century bishop St. Irenaeus of Lyons wrote, “When he was baptized, He did not Himself need baptism, but He sanctified the waters for those who would be baptized after Him.” John had baptized with water and prophesied of one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit; that prophecy was now fulfilled in Christ. Finally, the moment of his baptism launched our Lord’s public ministry. The Spirit anointed him as He embarked on the path that would eventually lead to the Cross.

What does our Lord’s baptism mean for us today? Every Sunday, we confess in the Nicene Creed that we “acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins.” From the earliest days of our Lord’s ministry, baptism has been an integral part of following Christ. Our Lord’s disciples baptized those who followed Him, the Church after Pentecost baptized all who joined their number, and baptism in the name of the Trinity was recognized by the Church Fathers as the entry point to new life in Christ. Christian baptism retains the form and meaning of earlier rites – washing with water for the forgiveness of sins – but now also faithfully conveys the gift of new life from the Spirit. As Jesus told the Pharisee Nicodemus, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” The

fourth-century Church Father St. Basil the Great wrote, “Baptism is the beginning of life, the mother of immortality, the renewal of the Spirit.” This life received in baptism is fundamentally different than mere physical existence; it is the Spirit-filled life of Christ.

St. Paul’s instructions to the Roman church in our epistle paint a beautiful picture of this life in the Spirit. There are two main themes in his exhortation. First, we are called to serve the Body of Christ by using our spiritual gifts. St. Paul often wrote about the gifts of the Spirit and each Christian’s responsibility to exercise his or her gifts. In this chapter of Romans, he highlights that our giftings differ, but we all must use whatever gifts we have faithfully. Elsewhere, in First Corinthians chapters twelve through fourteen, he uses an extended analogy of the Church as a body: the “Body of Christ.” Every believer is a member of the body, an organ with a purpose and therefore a responsibility to fulfill that role for the health of the Church. We must always remember that we cannot just “go to church.” None of us can simply attend or be spectators – we are all integral to the body’s functioning. If we will be faithful in responding to the calling of our Lord, we can trust that God will empower us with the gifts required to fulfill that vocation. As St. Paul says, then, “having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, *let us use them.*”

Second, St. Paul exhorts us to live in divine love and unity. The attitude of forgiveness, union, and care to which St. Paul calls us is contrary to both

the world and our flesh. Christian love for others is not an emotional affection contingent on liking those around us, but the hard work of caring for them – caring more for them than even our own selves. This life of love is a hard life, a strenuous vocation, but it is the only way to break the old hurts of sin and build the kingdom of God. If we want to be the Church as we ought to be, we must forgive those around us, commit to unity in the face of disagreement, and reject our own self-centeredness to care for those God has given us to love.

How can we possibly live this way? None of this is doable without the Holy Spirit. The Spirit empowers our gifts, guides us in how to love our neighbors, and sustains us when we know our own strength will be inadequate to the task. The life St. Paul describes in our epistle is the life of one who is anointed, anointed by the Spirit just as Christ was in his baptism. The word “Christian” makes this clear. Jesus is rightly called “Christ,” the “anointed,” and his followers are “little Christs,” baptized in the water and the Spirit and living the actual life of Christ himself.

In fact, St. Mark signals that Christ’s work continues in us. He begins his Gospel with what looks like what we now call a “chapter heading”: “the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” However, there are no other similar “headings” in his Gospel. This title does not then just apply to the first few paragraphs, but to the whole book. The whole ministry, passion, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ are only “the

beginning of the Gospel.” The good news continues, both in the Church as she grows in the Spirit and in each of our lives. If we will receive it, our lives will become the Gospel. Like our Lord, we are baptized, we minister in the Spirit, and we may suffer at the hands of those who reject God. Unless the Lord returns first, we will die, following Jesus where he has gone before as the pioneer of our faith. And, like our Lord, when we have been faithful to the end, we will rise to new eternal life and ourselves ascend to the presence of God.

So, as John the Baptist cried out, I say to you: Prepare the way of the Lord. Make the paths of your hearts straight and follow the beloved Son.

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