

## BECOME ALL FLAME

### **Sermon for Epiphany 1, the Baptism of our Lord, January 11, 2026**

*Readings:* Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17; Psalm 29

*Sermon text:* John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

Today we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord, as the feast day is known. The day Jesus was dunked by John the Baptist.

Now John was proclaiming “a baptism of water for the forgiveness of sins.” But, as he recognized, Jesus was not a sinful man. “I need to be baptized by you,” he told Jesus. No, Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

Fulfill all righteousness. What does that mean?

Righteousness—right relationship with God and each other; the fulfillment of God’s plan for creation; this is the fulfillment of righteousness.

God’s plan meant sending the Son to become human, and him going in all the way—full immersion, fully human. Which includes taking on the temptations and the sins of humanity—not cleansing them, but bearing them, all the way to the cross. And his bearing them meant our freedom. He died so that we may live. Praise God.

John the Baptist had a feeling about what was going to happen. He said mine is a baptism of water for the forgiveness of sins but the one who is coming will baptize with water and the Holy Spirit. Water to cleanse, fire to transform you.

Baptism means many things: a cleansing from sin—forgiveness, acceptance, adoption—and a welcome into the family, a new life of freedom and service, a first step into the kingdom of heaven and new creation. This is the path of transformation.

The entrance onto this path is a moment of grace—and includes a solemn taking of vows, by oneself or on behalf of a child or godchild.

The baptismal candle is lit. You are a child of God, beloved, free—and nothing can extinguish the love of God for you. But does the flame grow, or does it stay a sort of small pilot light in the soul, waiting for someone or something to turn up the heat? We do we continue to observe the vows we make in baptism?

Not talking about perfection, sinlessness. Of course we will continue to stumble and fall; we are freed from the bondage of sin, but not from temptation and fallibility. The baptismal covenant does not say *if* we fall into sin we should repent and turn again to Christ but *when* we fall into sin we promise to repent and try again. The goal is to grow into the full stature of Christ, as Paul put it. Inch by inch. Step by step.

Can you say that you living into your baptismal covenant? Fulfilling your vows? leading a converted, transformed life?

Are you finding yourself more thankful for your blessings, less concerned, or even bitter, about your hardships?

Do you feel the presence of God in your life?

Do you feel like a pilgrim gradually making your way to the promised land?

Do you trust God and follow Jesus?

Do you renounce sin and the devil—and practice forgiveness of others and an honest self examination, repentance and as needed, amendment of life?

Do you participate in the common life of the church—in the prayers and fellowship, in the sacraments, and the service?

If the answer to all of these questions is yes, please see me after church. And if the answer to all of these questions is no, please see me after church. If you are somewhere in the middle, struggling with faith but longing for God, well, let's take stock.

It is ironic, I suppose, that the baptism of our Lord takes place so soon after new year—the time in our secular world in which we are accustomed to make new year's resolutions.

Let's resolve to pray more, read the Bible, go to church regularly, give more generously to good causes, volunteer to help those in need, and get out there in the public square and fight for justice and peace—we definitely will need to do that. Like that soon to be cancelled gym membership, these resolutions may not last long. But they respond to a felt need—and a true one we all have—of growing in our life of faith, moving forward in our spiritual journey. And this is part of God's plan for the salvation of the world.

As a priest I know how many people have struggles with their faith, with their lives, with God. And I know how many long for a closer walk with Jesus, for the presence of God, an answer to prayer. Perhaps you are one of them.

Do you have that longing, is the Spirit is stirring in your soul, is Jesus is knocking on the door of your heart? well, let him in. It is never too early or too late. If you have had an experience of the uncanny awesome presence of God, don't dismiss it as something unexplainable, a sheer mystery—follow up with spiritual conversation and study. You are far from alone. Join a study or prayer group—we have them and I can direct you to others, online and in person. Make a new year's resolution—this year I will be transformed.

Let me conclude with a story from the desert fathers and mothers—Christian ascetics living in the Egyptian desert in the third and fourth centuries.

Abba Lot went to Abba Joseph and said to him, “Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?” Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, “If you will, you can become all flame.”