

*Beginning the Year as God's Beloved*

Matthew 3:13–17

Let us pray: Father God, we thank you for the gift of a new year. Through today's Word, help us to rediscover Christ and renew our identity in him. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

When a new year begins, we carry a sense of expectation in our hearts. "This year will be different." "Things will get a little better this year." But after a few days pass, we realize something: the calendar has changed, but our hearts are still complicated, life is still busy, and the world is still not an easy place.

At times like this, we often grow impatient. "Shouldn't I be producing something quickly? Shouldn't I be changing faster?" Yet history is not made in a single moment. While we are not paying attention, change is taking place. This is often how God works as well. Rather than through dramatic, visible events, God renews our lives in deep places that remain unseen.

Today's passage shows us this quiet but certain work of God. It is the scene in which Jesus receives baptism from John the Baptist. We often say that Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his ministry. That is true. But why does this matter for us? It is because this scene provides the gospel foundation that allows us to begin the new year again.

The passage begins with the words, "*Then.*" "Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him" (v. 13, NRSV). Jesus did not appear suddenly out of nowhere. After telling the story of his birth, the Gospel of Matthew leads us, through a long season of silence, to the Jordan River. For thirty years, Jesus lived a quiet, ordinary life. He worked, lived with his family, carried responsibilities, and knew the weight of human life just as we do.

Brothers and sisters, as you begin this new year, do your hearts feel heavy? Do you feel as though there is still no "great change" visible in your life? The thirty years of Jesus' life speak to us in this way: God does not regard seasons of preparation as a waste. Even in hidden times, even in ordinary days, God is shaping us.

And "then," when God's appointed moment arrives, Jesus walks toward the Jordan River. There is a time set by God. And there is such a time for us as well. The new year is a season in which we begin by trusting in *God's time*.

Many people had gathered at the Jordan River. John the Baptist was proclaiming repentance, and people came forward with hearts pierced by conviction. Then, among the crowd, Jesus appears. John is taken aback and says, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (v. 14). At that moment, Jesus responds, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” (v. 15).

Here, “righteousness” does not mean moral uprightness. It refers to the way of salvation that God is accomplishing, the will of God in which he delights. In order to begin that way, Jesus takes his place among sinners. This is the wonder of the gospel. Jesus did not keep his distance from sinners. He stepped directly into the complexity of our lives—into our weaknesses, wounds, and failures.

At times, we think, “I’ll go to God once I have things more together, once I’m a little better, a little holier.” But Jesus does the opposite. He comes to where we are, and he says, “I will stand with you.” The fact that he received baptism is the way of Emmanuel, God with us.

When we think about baptism, we may first think of it as “a sign of *my* decision to believe.” That meaning is certainly there. But Scripture leads us to something deeper. The apostle Paul says in Romans 6:3: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?”

Baptism is not merely about water; in a word, it is about *immersion*. It is being immersed into Christ. It is entering into the grace of dying with Christ and rising with him. For this reason, baptism does not end as a one-time event in the past. Baptism opens the door to a *life of immersion*. Just as a wedding ceremony opens the door to married life, baptism opens the door to a life of abiding in Christ.

Friends, why don’t we begin the new year this way? Not by saying, “This is the year I will accomplish more,” but by praying, “God, let this be the year I am immersed more deeply in Christ.” At times, we think of victory only as problems being resolved. But the victory of faith is often not what we expect. Even before the situation ends, when we turn our hearts toward God and trust him even in fear, that moment is already victory in God’s sight.

When the goals of the new year feel too heavy, let us remember *immersion* once again—not the faith we cling to, but *being immersed into Christ who holds us*. That grace is what gives us life.

Now we come to the central scene of today's passage, Matthew 3:16–17. "And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said..." (vv. 16–17a).

Brothers and sisters, the baptism of Jesus is not merely a ritual. It is an event in which heaven is opened. It is an event in which the Holy Spirit descends. And above all, it is an event in which the Father's voice is proclaimed: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (v. 17b).

Today, we want to hold on to this single sentence as the very center of the new year.

When a new year begins, we often find ourselves asking again, "Who am I?" When we fail, when we feel shaken, when we compare ourselves to others, when our hearts begin to crumble, we are tempted to define ourselves by our performance. But God declares over Jesus, "This is my Son." And in Christ, he extends that same grace to us.

Baptism marks upon us the identity that *we belong to God's family*. When we feel unsteady, we can say to ourselves, "I belong to God," "I have been called a child of God." This is the foundation of the new year.

God does not say, "I love you because you have done well." Before everyone, he bears witness first: "This is my Beloved." The new year often feels like a time when we must *prove* ourselves. But the gospel tells us otherwise. We are not loved because we prove ourselves; rather, *because we are loved, we are able to rise again*. If the truth that God loves us does not change, then we can begin again. Repentance, resolve, and obedience—all of these, in fact, flow out of this love.

Here we hear words that are even more astonishing: "with whom I am well pleased" (v. 17b). We often think, "I haven't done anything right yet; will God really be pleased with me?" "I am still weak; will God truly delight in me?"

Beloved, God does not only see our *present*. God sees the *future* that he will accomplish within us. God sees the work he will do to make us new in Christ. And because of this, God delights in hope.

These words reshape the very heart with which we begin the new year. We do not start in fear. We do not start under condemnation. We start in God's delight, God's expectation, and God's love.

So, what is it that we are called to do today? First, *repentance*. Repentance is not a time of being scolded. Repentance is a *time of turning back*. It is not that God is far away and we must climb up to him; it is that Jesus has come to us, and therefore we *can* turn back.

Even in the new year, we remain weak. We say we believe, yet our hearts wander. Worries grow larger than God, and hurts take precedence over love. So today, let us pray: "Lord, help me turn back again." "God, let me be immersed more deeply in Christ."

Second, we humbly receive the invitation of the gospel. The gospel does not say, "Do better," but "*Jesus stands with you*." Imagine Jesus at the Jordan River, standing among sinners. He is without sin, yet he waits for his turn to be baptized among them. That is how he stands in the midst of our lives today. The Lord speaks to us: "Do not be afraid. You are my Beloved." "I hold you, and I will walk with you into the new year."

Today we are not celebrating a baptism or a Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant. Yet we can begin the new year by remembering baptism. Baptism tells us: "You have died with Christ, and you have risen with him." "You are immersed in Christ." "You walk on the path where heaven is opened." "You are accompanied by the Spirit."

And today's passage reminds us once more: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Even as the new year begins, whenever our hearts feel shaken, let us meditate on this word. Before we judge ourselves, let us hear God's voice first.

The most important thing we are called to this year is not to accomplish more, but *to be immersed more deeply in Christ*. And from that place, to hear God's voice again: "You are my Beloved." "I delight in you." "I am with you."

May we be a community that begins the new year anchored in this voice. Amen.

Let us pray: Loving God, thank you for speaking to us again today. Before we strive to prove ourselves, You remind us that we are already loved. As we begin this week and this year, help us live from that truth, trusting Your grace and walking in hope and obedience. We offer our lives to You with gratitude, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.