

Natalie W. Bell  
January 11, 2026  
Baptism of Jesus

**Beloved**  
**Matthew 3:13-17**

<sup>13</sup> Then **Jesus came from Galilee** to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup> John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” <sup>15</sup> But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. <sup>16</sup> And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly **the heavens were opened to him and he saw God’s Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him.** <sup>17</sup> And a voice from the heavens said, “**This is my Son, the Beloved,**<sup>[e]</sup> **with whom I am well pleased.**”

**When I go back to Oklahoma, I always go to our family farm**

about an hour away from Tulsa.

The land has been in the family since 1901.

**The Williams Dairy there was well known,**

and my grandfather also served Farmer’s Union insurance  
and the Federal Land Bank.

And it’s a very large family—with most of our relatives still living nearby.

So the last name is well known in the area.

If I tell people in town that my name is Natalie Bell

they may have no idea who I am.

**But if I say I’m Natalie Williams Bell,**

**then suddenly there is an association with the whole family.**

People know where the farm is,

they know whose kids and grands and greats those are.

Names are **important**.

They are **meaningful**.

There’s **something powerful** about your name, right?

Isn’t it special when someone unexpectedly **remembers** your name?

Today we have two passages—from ***Isaiah and Matthew***—that talk about the importance of names.

***And not just ANY names—OUR names, given by God.***

In Isaiah 43, one of my all-time favorite passages,

God says: ***I have called you by name, you are mine...***

Why? ***Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.***

***Do not fear, for I am with you.***

And then at Jesus' own baptism, God calls Jesus by name:

*a voice from the heavens says,*

***“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”***

The Son, the Beloved.

That's the name of Jesus.

***Maya Lin, the designer of the Vietnam Memorial,***

once explained why her work captures the hearts of the American people.

She said: “It's the **names**--the names **ARE** the memorial.

*No edifice or structure can bring people to mind as powerfully as their names.”*

***I think that's true of the 9/11 memorial too.***

It's the names that cut to the heart.

That's what we think about as we stand there---the people, their names.

Names are **powerful**.

And **unique**.

They are **individual**.

They **mean something**—to us, and everyone around us.

***In the Bible, names carry great meaning and symbolism.***

God **changes** the names of many people in the Bible,

When God changes their **mission** in life.

After **Jacob** wrestles with God—his name is changed to Israel.

**Abram's** name is changed to Abraham after the covenant is established.

**Saul's** name is changed to **Paul**

after his vision and transformation on the road to Damascus.

***Do ever think about your given name?***

And what about the name ***that GOD gives you?***

The name, ***Child of God, the Beloved?***

***A lot of people get caught up in the story of Jesus' baptism,  
Wondering why he was baptized at all.***

I mean, wasn't he without sin?

Isn't baptism about washing away sin?

Even John the Baptist had his reservations about Jesus' being baptized.

***And if baptism is ONLY about washing away sin, then it IS confusing.***

But what if baptism is ALSO about a new name and identity?

What if it's about a ***relationship*** with God, and with the body of Christ?

What if baptism provides us a new ***name***—Beloved,

And a new ***identity***—Child of God?

And if that's the case, how do we ***live into that*** as we remember our own baptism?

Pastor David Lose says:

*We are at a time and place where **so many would like to identify and define us by many, many names:** Democrat or Republican, conservative or liberal, American or foreigner, gay or straight, rich or poor, Black or White, and the list goes on. Additionally, we are also and increasingly named and defined by the products we use or stores at which we shop. Nike, Apple, BMW, Tiffany—these are not just company names, but lend a particular sense of self, and increasingly the brand labels on our shirts, shoes, cars, and computers convey a great deal of our identity.*

<https://www.davidlose.net/2017/01/baptism-of-our-lord>

***But NONE of the names that others apply, or the names of things we OWN,  
Or what we DO,***

is as important as our ***PRIMARY name, and our PRIMARY identity:***

Beloved Child of God.

That name and identity grants us a ***new life*** in Christ.

When we are baptized, we join a ***new family*** of faith.

We claim an ***inheritance***.

We are baptized just as Jesus was—  
and we receive a similar name and identity.

Beloved, Child of God.

***It is only AFTER Jesus' baptism that he is tempted and tested,  
And then begins his public ministry.***

In other words, baptism is the key to ***WHO*** he is, and ***WHO he belongs to***.  
He is a Son, the Beloved.

And that name and identity ***gives him the power to go out into ministry***.

***What if the same is true for US?***

What if we lived into our own baptism,  
So much—that we knew we had the power inside,  
to do what God calls to do?  
What would that look like in YOUR life?

***Baptism provides an internal power source***

***The power of the Holy Spirit ---***

Something beyond our own strength and courage.  
And that power, if we call upon it, can help us—every single day of our lives.

Martin Luther used to wash his face,  
Touch his forehead,  
And remind himself of his identity.

***He said: Remember Martin, you are BAPTIZED.***

***Friends, we too are BAPTIZED.***

And those who have not yet received the sacrament,  
are graciously welcome to do so when they are ready.  
The invitation is always open.

***We are BAPTIZED,***

Which means we have new ***strength***,  
New ***courage***,  
New ***mission and ministry*** that is possible.  
Just as it was for Jesus after his own baptism.

***But all too often,  
We give in to the voices of negativity in our world,  
And even in our own hearts.***

Maybe we think that we don't need God.

Or, that we don't deserve a relationship with God.

Maybe we feel like we can do a better job than God!

***And the story of baptism brings us back to the TRUTH.***

God is God. And we are God's children.

And we are beloved.

We are treasured.

In the words of Isaiah, we are ***precious, and honored, and loved.***

Have you ever thought of God as that ***loving parent***, who says,  
*you are my child, I'm pleased with you?*

Author and theologian Henri Nouwen once said,

*"Over the years, I have come to realize that the **greatest trap** in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but **self-rejection**....*

*When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity, and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions. **The real trap, however, is self-rejection.***

*As soon as someone accuses me or criticizes me, as soon as I am rejected, left alone, or abandoned,*

*I find myself thinking, "Well, that proves once again that I am a nobody." ...*

*..I am no good... I deserve to be pushed aside, forgotten, rejected, and abandoned.*

*Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life*

*because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the "**Beloved.**"*

***Being the Beloved constitutes the CORE TRUTH of our existence."***

*Henri Nouwen, Life of the Beloved, Crossroad: NY, 1992, pg. 31-33.*

***I think some of the pain caused by people in power is actually about not seeing others as beloved children of God.***

But that's who we REALLY ARE.

We are brothers and sisters in humanity.

I wonder what the world would look like if we believed that,

And acted in that spirit of community?

***I think of the violence and pain happening every day.***

The dehumanization of immigrants,

The alienation of people one from another.

We do NOT treat each other as children of God.

Our leaders do not encourage that, or uphold that value.

***It's on US as people of faith to do that.***

Isaiah 43 and the Baptism of Jesus are ***perfectly paired*** because

In his baptism, Jesus passes through the waters of life,

and comes to his ***full identity*** as the Son of God, and Savior of the world.

He goes on to ***bring new life*** to all of God's people.

Just as God affirms his life and ministry at his baptism.

And it is ***the same God***---who declared through the prophet ***Isaiah***:

*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you....*

*Do not fear, for I am with you.*

It's powerful to hear ***both*** passages,

As we ***remember our own baptism***.

Because in ***our baptism***, we pass through the waters of new life,

Just like the Israelites did in the Exodus.

Of course, passing through the waters of new life,

***does NOT PREVENT us from suffering*** in this life.

Jesus himself passed through the waters of baptism,

But he also suffered.....

Instead, passing through the waters of baptism

assures us of ***WHO*** we are, and ***WHOSE*** we are,

despite the challenges of life.

It gives us a ***new perspective*** on life,

It gives us a ***new lens*** to look at life.

It gives us ***a reason to show love and respect*** to one another—

something sorely missing in our world today.

***Our identity as children of God,***

helps us make it through the waters and fires of life—

Because we have the ***power and love*** of God in our hearts.

***Our identity also helps us as we join two families of faith—***

Lincroft and Matawan, into one body of Christ.

Today we remember in the words of Ephesians,

That there is ***ONE Lord, one faith, one baptism.***

And it is our ***baptismal identity that truly makes us ONE.***

***We look at our mosaic and remember that we made that,***

***Together, as a symbol of becoming ONE family.***

It reminds us that God uses the pieces of our lives, and of our community,

To make something beautiful.

The dove is rising from the waters into a new day—just like we rise

from the waters of baptism, and this merger, into a new day, together.

And just like Jesus, when we are baptized,

***we are built up from the inside.***

We are ***chosen, affirmed, and given*** our name and our mission.

Today after the sermon, we will ***reaffirm our own baptism***

with a special affirmation of faith.

And if you wish---you can come forward after the liturgy

and receive a small cross,

to help you remember your baptism.

And for those who have ***not yet been baptized,***

Know you are welcome too, and you are welcome to be baptized in the future.

My prayer is that this small act

can remind us of ***WHO we are, and WHOSE we are.***

And that God calls each of us ***by name—***

Giving us a ***power and love*** to share.

Friends, hear the **Good News** of the Gospel today:  
God is **with us**—through all the waters and fires of life.  
God has **called us** by name,  
And we are Beloved children.  
May we hear this promise, believe it, and share it.  
And for that, all God's people can say together, Amen.