

Homily January 18 2026 Jesus's Baptism

I start with a question: When in our lives, have we come to the conclusion that something someone is going to do makes no sense? And then, somehow, it plays out and we (and likely many others with us), are proved wrong because of the outcome, which does actually work and in fact shows itself to be a good thing?

I think this is what happens with John the Baptist, *Gift of Goodwill* today.

I remember in Italy, visiting an elderly and very dear Polish friend in her home where we had been welcome visitors for nearly a couple of decades. She was really struggling with pain and immobility in one of her shoulders and I kept getting a prompt from within me, to pray for her shoulder. My hands tingled and I had a strong desire that I could not hold back, and so suggested a prayer time together.

She, however, said that she didn't believe there was an entity called God, and if there was, she believed he would be a logical God and that, it is common sense that as people age their bodies break down and get sore so there's nothing to do but bear the discomfort.

Her rationale, however convincing, did not stop the desire in me to pray with her. I told her I appreciated her way of thinking, but she hadn't stopped the desire in my hands to touch her shoulder. I told her that she didn't need to do anything except sit and submit herself to the touch of my hands. So she graciously sat and I invited Vincent to join us and we prayed together in silence. When I had finished and removed my hands, she asked with much animation, "Did you hear it too?" "What?" I asked. "Beethoven's 7th Symphony," she said. It was so beautiful." The heavens had opened up with music for her.

When I sat with today's readings, I started to empathize with John. A little background first. It is possible for a time that John and Jesus grew up together as cousins. They were about 6 months apart in age. Jesus's mother Mary, or Miriam would have been at John's birth several months before her own pregnancy came to term.

James D. Tabor, historian, suggests that, as an older mother, if Elizabeth died before John matured, he may have been raised in the same household as Jesus. So, in today's gospel, John has just announced to everyone at the river, not unlike he announced to his mom in utero by giving a good kick and a somersault when he heard Mary's voice, that his relative was someone special. A person who could offer something even greater than *his* baptism. Jesus carried a remarkable energy for change.

John's baptism was a ritual of repentance and water. Much as baptism is today, it simulated death and new life by dunking the person under in the river and bringing them up to a new way of being. Jesus had not yet begun his ministry and so was "undiscovered" by the people. But John knew about the fire in his cousin and he tells the people that his ritual of baptism holds no contest to the burning Spirit that Jesus would administer.

/Jesus has purposefully journeyed for several days to get to John in the Jordan. His request for baptism is his very first statement in the gospel of Matthew. And what he says makes no sense to John, especially after what he's just told all the people. So he resists.

The position Jesus takes with John in response is that – there is a greater purpose we might not see, a righteousness, that is, a way of John's baptism in Jesus body to bring honour to the Great Spirit. Brendan Byrne tells us this righteousness is to do "What God wants."

To be baptized by John is something Jesus has sensed he *has* to do, because God wants it. The Holy One of All Life has prompted Jesus to submit himself to John's authority.

One invitation for us in today's readings may be to listen into our lives for the intention of God to bless us beyond our expectations. This starts, perhaps with the prayer of today's psalm: "Open us".

While our common sense keeps life orderly, being open to the possibility that God has our back in unexpected ways can bring about a surprise like the delight of hearing the most beautiful rendition of Beethoven's 7th symphony.

We see this gift-giving in the first reading. The God of Israel goes beyond what the listener expects. "It is not enough for you to do my bidding" in regard to the restoration of what's gone wrong with your family and those in your nation. There is more.

The flood of blessing at Jesus' baptism parallels this gift of light. Such light can fire beyond our common sense, and beyond our doubts that we've done the right thing. God's touch ignites us. It prompts us to say something necessary in a difficult moment or to act compassionately in a conflict.

Malcolm Guite's poem says a similar thing.

"[She] calls us too, to step into that river, [to submit our minds and bodies]
To die and rise and live and love forever."

Jesus trusted what God wanted and subjected himself to John's authority. John therefore shared in the start of Jesus's ministry because they agreed to trust this message from his Abwoon, that he was to receive John's baptism-- against all common sense. And so, Jesus is doused visibly and audibly with love and approval before he faces the trials of his ministry. It holds that we are all beloved, whether we believe in a healing God or a logical or not-at-all God. We can all receive.

In our sharing circles today, what did you notice in today's readings?

When have you or someone you know done something contrary to common sense or popular opinion—how did it turn out?

What is an experience in your life of wading into the water of rivers, lakes or oceans?

Brendan Byrne p. 39 *Gospel of Mark: Lifting the Burden*