

# By Water and the Spirit: Called Before We Choose

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The Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A  
January 18, 2026 | Grace UMC, Denver, CO

*Listen to me, coastlands; pay attention, peoples far away. The Lord called me before my birth, called my name when I was in my mother's womb. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, and hid me in the shadow of God's own hand. He made me a sharpened arrow, and concealed me in God's quiver, saying to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I show my glory." But I said, "I have wearied myself in vain. I have used up my strength for nothing." Nevertheless, the Lord will grant me justice; my reward is with my God. And now the Lord has decided, the one who formed me from the womb as his servant, to restore Jacob to God, so that Israel might return to him. Moreover, I'm honored in the Lord's eyes; my God has become my strength. He said: It is not enough, since you are my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the survivors of Israel. Hence, I will also appoint you as light to the nations so that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. The Lord, redeemer of Israel and its holy one, says to one despised, rejected by nations, to the slave of rulers: Kings will see and stand up; commanders will bow down on account of the Lord, who is faithful, the holy one of Israel, who has chosen you. Isaiah 49:1-7*

*I waited and waited for you, God! Now at last you have turned to me and heard my cry for help. You have lifted me out of the horrible pit, out of the slough of the marsh; you set my feet on a rock and steadied my steps. God, you have put a new song in my mouth—a song of praise. Many will look on in awe and will put their trust in you. Happy are those who put their trust in God and do not side with rebels who stray after false gods. How many wonders you have done for us, God, our God! How many plans you have made for us! You have no equal. I want to proclaim your deeds again and again, but they are more than I can count. You, who wanted no sacrifice or oblation, opened my ear; you asked no sacrifice for sin. Then I said, "Here I am! I have come!" In the scroll of the book it is prescribed for me to obey your will. I have never kept your justice hidden within myself, but have spoken of your faithfulness and saving help; I have made no secret of your love and faithfulness in the Great Assembly. May your love and faithfulness constantly protect me. Psalm 40*

*The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one about whom I said, 'He who comes after me is really greater than me because he existed before me.' Even I didn't recognize him, but I came baptizing with water so that he might be made known to Israel." John testified, "I saw the Spirit coming down from heaven like a dove, and it rested on him. Even I didn't recognize him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'The one on whom you see the Spirit coming down and resting is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and testified that this one is God's Son." The next day John was standing again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus walking along he said, "Look! The Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard what he said, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he asked, "What are you looking for?" They said, "Rabbi (which is translated Teacher), where are you staying?" He replied, "Come and see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two disciples who heard what John said and followed Jesus was Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Christ). He led him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter). John 1:29-42*

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

Last week we began this worship series on Baptism by returning to the waters with a baptism and a reaffirmation and remembrance of our baptisms. We started listening carefully to what the church actually teaches about this sacrament. Using "By Water and the Spirit," the United Methodist Church's 1996 official teaching on baptism, we started with a foundational claim that shapes everything else. Baptism is not first about our response to

God. It is all about God's action toward us. Before we choose, decide, or understand, God moves toward us with grace. God speaks. God claims. God acts.

That matters, because baptism is often treated as something we do once faith feels settled and secure. We are used to thinking of it as a marker of spiritual readiness or a public statement of belief. Last week, standing at the baptism of Jesus, we saw a different pattern. Before Jesus preaches, before he heals, before he gathers disciples, God names him beloved. Identity is given before any work is done. Baptism begins not with a promise we make, but with a promise God intends to keep.

Over the coming weeks, this series will continue to explore what baptism means for the life of faith and for the life of the church. Each week builds on the last. If last week we asked who acts in baptism, this week we ask a different question. If God acts first, what does baptism actually give us before belief is clear or understanding is complete? What does God place into our lives at the very beginning of the journey of faith?

That question matters more than we might expect. Many of us live with the assumption that faith must be strong before belonging is possible, that understanding must come before identity. Scripture consistently tells the story the other way around. God names people before they know who they are becoming. God calls people before they are ready to respond. God claims people before belief has fully formed.

So this morning, I'm not dismissing belief or minimizing its importance. I'm asking what comes before it. And to explore that, we begin with stories of calling and naming that happen long before anyone has the language, confidence, or clarity to explain what God is doing.

In our reading from the Prophet Isaiah, the servant speaks about a calling that began long before he was aware of it. He tells us that the Lord called him before he was born and named him while he was still in the womb. This is not a story about someone gradually discovering a vocation through reflection or spiritual growth. It is a testimony about God acting first, speaking identity before the servant has any opportunity to define himself.

Throughout this passage, God is clearly the one who acts. God calls. God names. God claims this person for a purpose that will unfold over time. The servant does not initiate the relationship or negotiate the terms of the calling. He receives it. His task is not to invent an identity, but to live into one that God has already spoken into his life.

What makes this passage especially honest is that the servant does not present himself as confident or successful. Later in the text, he admits discouragement and frustration. The work feels heavy, and the results seem uncertain. Yet even in that moment of doubt, God's call does not waver. God does not withdraw the name that has been spoken. The servant's identity remains grounded in God's promise rather than in the servant's performance or understanding.

Isaiah offers a picture of faith that begins not with clarity or certainty, but with being addressed by God. God speaks first, and the servant spends a lifetime learning how to live into what has already been said. Identity is given long before understanding catches up. That matters for baptism, because it suggests that God's first word to a life is not a set of instructions, but a name. And if that is how God works, then it helps us see why, in the Gospel of John, people begin following Jesus before they can explain who he is or what that following will demand.

When we turn to the reading from John's Gospel account, we see the same pattern unfold, but this time not in poetry or prophecy, but in lived encounter. The Prophet John the

Baptizer names Jesus before anyone else fully understands who Jesus is. He points and says, “Here is the Lamb of God,” offering language that is rich to us, sure, but not yet clear to those around him. The people who hear him do not respond with a confession of faith. They respond with curiosity.

Two disciples begin to follow Jesus, not because they understand him, but because they have been addressed and invited. When Jesus turns and asks what they are looking for, they do not give a theological answer. They ask a practical one: “Where are you staying?” And Jesus responds not with explanation, but with invitation. “Come and see.”

What stands out in this exchange is how little certainty is required to begin. No one articulates belief. No one demonstrates understanding. The disciples are not tested or corrected. They are welcomed into relationship. Their following begins with proximity, not clarity, and their understanding unfolds only after time spent with Jesus.

John’s writing suggests that discipleship often begins this way. People are named, pointed toward Jesus, and invited to stay before they understand the ins and outs of staying. Identity as a follower begins before belief is fully formed. Relationship comes first, and spiritual depth grows within it.

That raises an important question as we think about baptism. If following Jesus begins with being named and invited rather than with having everything figured out, then how does the church reflect that same pattern when it baptizes? And what does it mean for baptism to name an identity that faith will spend a lifetime growing into?

This is where the church’s teaching becomes especially important, because *By Water and the Spirit* is not responding to a trend or solving a practical problem. It is articulating a theological conviction about how God works. The document does not ask when belief is

strong enough, sincere enough, or articulate enough. Instead, it asks a more basic question: what does God give at the very beginning of the life of faith?

The answer the church offers is consistent and deliberate. Baptism is described not as a reward for belief or a confirmation of understanding, but as a gift of grace. It is God's action toward us, offered before faith can be fully named and before understanding is secure. That is why the document can say plainly that baptism is "God's gift offered to persons of all ages." The emphasis here is not primarily on age, but on grace that does not wait for readiness, maturity, or explanation.

What baptism gives first is identity. In baptism, God names a person, which is why we say their name in the actual ritual. Baptism also marks someone as belonging to Christ, which is why they're anointed with oil like kings and queens. Finally, baptism incorporates them into the life of the church, which is why we welcome them as a member of Christ's holy church at the end. They're baptized members now. Baptism establishes a foundation on which faith can grow. Belief, understanding, and commitment are expected to deepen over time within a community that nurtures and teaches.

This teaching echoes what we have already seen in scripture. Isaiah is named before he understands the full scope of his calling. The disciples follow Jesus before they can explain who he is. In baptism, the church trusts that God is working in the same way. God names first, and faith grows into that name through sacrament, worship, teaching, and shared life.

What is especially striking is that the church does not merely state this theology in a document. It enacts it, week after week, whenever baptism is celebrated. The theology of identity-before-understanding is not only taught. It is practiced. And to see that, we need to pay attention to how baptism actually unfolds in worship.

If we want to see this theology practiced rather than explained, we only need to remember what we witnessed last week at the font. In the baptismal liturgy, the church does not begin by asking what the baptized understands or believes. It begins by proclaiming what God promises to do. Before any vows are spoken, the church declares that baptism is incorporation into Christ's holy church and marks us as God's own.

When the congregation is asked to participate, the question is not directed first to the one being baptized, but to the community. We are asked, "Will you nurture one another in the Christian faith and life and include these persons now before you in your care?" The church answers before the baptized ever can. The liturgy assumes that faith will be learned, lived, practiced, and formed over time, and that the community bears responsibility for that formation. Oh, hear that again. Our baptismal theology and liturgy **assumes** that faith will be learned, lived, practiced, and formed over time, and that the **community** bears responsibility for that formation. The pastor is just one part of that community. The Sunday School teacher is just one part of that community. The responsibility of spiritual and faith development belongs to the community of faith.

Even the language spoken over the water reflects this order. We pray that God's Spirit will work through the water to bring new birth, not as a response to belief already perfected, but as the beginning of a life shaped by grace. The words spoken at the font do not celebrate readiness. They declare belonging.

What the liturgy makes clear is this: baptism does not wait for faith to be finished. It trusts God enough to begin. It names identity first and then commits the church to nurture what God has already claimed. And having just witnessed that liturgy together, we are reminded that this is not an idea we hold. It is a promise we practice.

Our Psalm for today, Psalm 40 gives us language for what life looks like after identity has been named but before everything is clear. The psalmist does not describe instant confidence or settled belief. Instead, there is waiting, trust learned over time, and a song of faith that emerges gradually. Faith here is not certainty achieved, but life shaped by a promise that holds steady even when understanding takes time to catch up.

That is where this week's journey leaves us. Isaiah shows us a servant named before birth. John's Gospel account shows disciples following Jesus before belief is fully formed. The church's teaching tells us that baptism gives identity before comprehension. The liturgy enacts that truth by naming belonging and promising nurture. Psalm 40 reminds us that the space between naming and knowing is not failure. It is faithful waiting.

Baptism does not eliminate questions or hurry belief along. It gives us a place to be nurtured while faith grows. It names us as God's beloved and then entrusts us to a community where trust, understanding, and discipleship can deepen over time. To live the baptized life is not to have everything settled, but to keep returning to the promise that God has already spoken.

And so we close not with a demand for certainty, but with confidence in grace. Baptism gives us a name to live into, a community to walk with, and a God who remains steadfast as our faith continues to take shape. Amen.