# By Water and the Spirit:
# When God Comes to the Water

The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, Year A
January 11, 2026 | Grace UMC, Denver, CO

The Rev. Seth O'Kegley

*But here is my servant, the one I uphold; my chosen, who brings me delight. I've put my spirit upon him; he will bring justice to the nations. He won't cry out or shout aloud or make his voice heard in public. He won't break a bruised reed; he won't extinguish a faint wick, but he will surely bring justice. He won't be extinguished or broken until he has established justice in the land. The coastlands await his teaching. God the Lord says—the one who created the heavens, the one who stretched them out, the one who spread out the earth and its offspring, the one who gave breath to its people and life to those who walk on it—I, the Lord, have called you for a good reason. I will grasp your hand and guard you, and give you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, to open blind eyes, to lead the prisoners from prison, and those who sit in darkness from the dungeon. I am the Lord; that is my name; I don't hand out my glory to others or my praise to idols. The things announced in the past—look—they've already happened, but I'm declaring new things. Before they even appear, I tell you about them.* Isaiah 42:1-9

*You, divine beings! Give to the Lord—give to the Lord glory and power! Give to the Lord the glory due his name! Bow down to the Lord in holy splendor! The Lord's voice is over the waters; the glorious God thunders; the Lord is over the mighty waters. The Lord's voice is strong; the Lord's voice is majestic. The Lord's voice breaks cedar trees—yes, the Lord shatters the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon jump around like a young bull, makes Sirion jump around like a young wild ox. The Lord's voice unleashes fiery flames; the Lord's voice shakes the wilderness—yes, the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The Lord's voice convulses the oaks, strips the forests bare, but in his temple everyone shouts, "Glory!" The Lord sits enthroned over the floodwaters; the Lord sits enthroned—king forever! Let the Lord give strength to his people! Let the Lord bless his people with peace!* Psalm 29

*At that time Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan River so that John would baptize him. John tried to stop him and said, "I need to be baptized by you, yet you come to me?" Jesus answered, "Allow me to be baptized now. This is necessary to fulfill all righteousness." So John agreed to baptize Jesus. When Jesus was baptized, he immediately came up out of the water. Heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and resting on him. A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him."* Matthew 3:13-17

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

Today we begin a new worship series shaped with *By Water and the Spirit*, the official United Methodist teaching on baptism. Over the next several weeks, we will be exploring what the church believes baptism is and what it does, not simply as a ritual, but as a central doctrine of Christian life. Believe it or not, this doctrinal piece came before the 1996 General Conference right here in Denver. So you could say we have a close relationship to baptism here. This document was adopted to help the church recover and revitalize its understanding of baptism, especially in a time when baptism is often reduced to a personal milestone or an optional tradition rather than part of a shared confession of faith.

It feels especially fitting to begin this series today, on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, and even more so because we will celebrate a special baptism in worship. It's amazing because this is the heart of what we are talking about. Baptism is not something we explain from a distance. It is something the church does, receives, and rejoices in together. Today we are not just learning about baptism. We are witnessing God's grace at work among us through sweet Lily.

This series is not about inventing new meanings or revising old practices. As By Water and the Spirit reminds us, "Contemporary United Methodism is attempting to recover and revitalize its understanding of baptism." What we are doing together is remembering. Remembering how scripture speaks about water and Spirit, how the early church understood baptism, and how the United Methodist Church continues to confess the sacrament of baptism as a gift of God's grace that forms identity, creates belonging, and sends us into the world.

In the United Methodist Church, we understand baptism as a sacrament, which means it is more than a symbol or a religious custom. A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, given to us by God and instituted by Christ. Let me say that one more time. A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, given to us by God and instituted by Christ. In baptism, ordinary water becomes the means through which God promises forgiveness, new life, and incorporation into the body of Christ. The grace of the sacrament does not depend on our understanding, memory, or sincerity. It depends solely on God's faithfulness. When the church baptizes, we trust that God is truly at work, using physical signs to communicate spiritual reality and to shape us into a people formed by grace.

Before we look closely at Jesus standing in the waters of the Jordan, it matters that we hear clearly what the church is claiming when it speaks about baptism at all. In *By Water and the*

*Spirit*, the United Methodist Church begins with: "Baptism is the sacrament of initiation into the body of Christ." That statement sets the direction for everything else. Baptism is not primarily about an individual moment of faith or even a personal spiritual milestone. It is about God incorporating people into Christ and into the life of the Church.

That way of understanding baptism is deeply biblical. Throughout scripture, God's saving work is not limited to isolated individuals but is directed toward forming a people. Isaiah speaks of a servant called and named by God for the sake of the nations. The psalms regularly describe God addressing the community gathered before the Lord. Baptism fits squarely within that pattern. It is how the church recognizes that God is doing what God has always done, claiming people and binding them together in covenant.

This understanding is also not unique to modern Methodism. From the earliest days of the Proto-Christian, or very early Christian Church, baptism was understood as the ordinary way people entered Christian life. One of the earliest Christian teaching documents, the Didache, simply instructs believers to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, assuming that baptism is how one comes to belong. There is no sense that baptism is a reward for spiritual maturity. It is the beginning of life in Christ, not the culmination of it.

When the United Methodist Church insists that baptism is initiation into the body of Christ, it is intentionally resisting the idea that baptism is primarily about self-expression or individual choice. Baptism is first about God's action and the church's response to that action. It is about belonging before believing perfectly, identity before accomplishment, and grace before understanding. That claim prepares us to hear the story of Jesus' baptism not as an exception, but as the foundation of everything that follows.

With that understanding in place, we turn to the story of Jesus' baptism. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus comes to the Jordan not because he needs repentance, forgiveness, or

correction. Even John hesitates, sensing that something about this moment reverses the expected order. Yet Jesus steps into the water anyway, identifying himself fully with the people he has come to save.

What happens next is striking, and not for what Jesus does, but for what God does. The heavens open. The Spirit descends. A voice speaks. Before Jesus teaches a parable, heals the sick, or gathers disciples, God names him: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Identity is given before any work is done. Grace is spoken before obedience begins.

Isaiah's words echo this same pattern. God names the servant, delights in the servant, and promises to uphold the servant before describing the work that lies ahead. Psalm 29 places God's powerful voice over the waters themselves, reminding us that water in scripture is not neutral. It is a place where God acts, speaks, and creates new beginnings. Together, these texts insist that baptism is not first about human response but about divine initiative.

This is why *By Water and the Spirit* is so clear in its language. Baptism is not something we achieve or earn. It is something we receive. The document teaches that baptism is grounded in God's grace, given before we are capable of fully understanding or responding to it. In other words, baptism makes visible what scripture proclaims again and again: God moves toward us before we ever move toward God.

The early church recognized this immediately. Writing in the second century, St. Justin Martyr described baptism as "illumination," emphasizing that in baptism something is revealed and given, not merely declared by the one being baptized. The pattern remains consistent across scripture, tradition, and doctrine. God speaks first. God acts first. Baptism names us as beloved before it calls us to live as disciples.

This is stated plainly in *By Water and the Spirit*, which teaches that baptism is "God's gift offered to persons of all ages." That sentence matters because it refuses to make grace dependent on maturity, memory, or verbal confession. Baptism is grounded in God's faithfulness, not in our capacity to explain what God is doing. The church does not baptize because someone has reached the right level of understanding. The church baptizes because God has promised to meet us with grace.

This understanding is deeply Wesleyan. The founder of Methodism, the Rev. John Wesley spoke often of prevenient grace, or the grace that goes before. Baptism is one of the clearest ways the church proclaims that grace. In baptism, God is already at work drawing, claiming, and forming us long before we can name that work for ourselves. The water marks the beginning of a relationship that God sustains.

Early Christian writers recognized this same truth. St. Justin Martyr could describe baptism as illumination because it revealed God's action rather than celebrating human achievement. Baptism was not treated as a graduation into holiness but as entry into a life where growth, learning, and transformation could finally begin. The church trusted that God's grace would continue to work long after the water dried.

This is why baptism is not about having it all together. It is about trusting that God acts first and keeps acting. Baptism marks the promise that God's grace will not wait for perfection before showing up. It meets us at the beginning, calls us beloved, and commits to walking with us for the long journey of faith that lies ahead.

One of the most important clarifications *By Water and the Spirit* makes is that baptism is never just about water alone. Christian baptism is always water and the Spirit together. The outward sign and the inward grace belong to one another and cannot be separated without losing the heart of the sacrament.

Matthew's account makes this unmistakable. As Jesus comes up from the water, the Spirit descends and God's voice is heard. Water, Spirit, and Word converge in a single moment. Baptism is not simply a human action performed with religious intention. It is a moment where God promises to be present and active through tangible means. Psalm 29 reinforces this imagery by placing God's voice over the waters themselves, reminding us that water in scripture is consistently a place of divine action and creative power.

*By Water and the Spirit* names this clearly when it teaches that "the baptism of the Holy Spirit is the power of God's love at work in human lives." Baptism is not magic, but neither is it empty symbolism. The church trusts that God uses ordinary elements to communicate extraordinary grace. Water becomes the means through which God promises new life, forgiveness, and belonging.

This conviction is not unique to the United Methodist Church. From the earliest centuries, Christians spoke about baptism with confidence and joy. Second century Christian thinker Tertullian could refer to baptism as "our sacrament of water," not because the water itself was special, but because God had promised to meet the church there. The physical act mattered because God chose to work through it. Spirit and water together marked the beginning of a transformed life.

To say that baptism is a means of grace is to say that God is truly at work in it. Something happens that does not depend on our emotions, our clarity, or our sincerity. God acts through water and Spirit to shape identity, form community, and sustain faith. That is why baptism is never reduced to a mere reminder of something else. It is itself a moment of grace given and received.

Because baptism is God's action and not simply a personal expression of faith, it always draws us into community. *By Water and the Spirit* names this clearly when it teaches that "through baptism we are joined with the church and with Christians everywhere." Baptism is how the church recognizes that God has incorporated someone into the body of Christ.

From the earliest days of the church, baptism marked belonging. It was not a private spiritual moment but a public act that bound people to a community shaped by worship, teaching, and shared life. Baptism established identity before participation and belonging before understanding. The church did not wait for perfection or understanding, but trusted God's grace to form faith over time.

This is why baptism is celebrated in worship and witnessed by the congregation. The vows we make are promises to walk together in faith, to nurture one another, and to live as the body of Christ. Whether or not we remember our baptism, it continues to name who we are and to whom we belong.

Now, after the voice speaks and the Spirit descends, Jesus does not remain at the water's edge. He leaves the Jordan and steps into the world God loves. The baptism does not remove his struggles. It names belovedness within them. It marks the beginning of a life lived in trust that God has already spoken grace. That is true for Jesus, and it is true for us. Baptism grounds us for the journey ahead. It reminds us that before we act, before we choose, before we understand, God has already claimed us. The water marks a promise God intends to keep.

Today, as we witness a baptism and begin this series together, we are reminded that baptism is not something we leave behind. It is something we live from. Week by week, we will return to this truth. God acts first. God names us beloved. God joins us to one another. And God sends us into the world shaped by water and the Spirit. Amen.