

By Water and the Spirit: Sent Into the World

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A
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Shout loudly; don’t hold back; raise your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their crime, to the house of Jacob their sins. They seek me day after day, desiring knowledge of my ways like a nation that acted righteously, that didn’t abandon their God. They ask me for righteous judgments, wanting to be close to God. “Why do we fast and you don’t see; why afflict ourselves and you don’t notice?” Yet on your fast day you do whatever you want and oppress all your workers. You quarrel and brawl, and then you fast; you hit each other violently with your fists. You shouldn’t fast as you are doing today if you want to make your voice heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I choose, a day of self-affliction, of bending one’s head like a reed and of lying down in mourning clothing and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Isn’t this the fast I choose: releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke, setting free the mistreated, and breaking every yoke? Isn’t it sharing your bread with the hungry and bringing the homeless poor into your house, covering the naked when you see them, and not hiding from your own family? Then your light will break out like the dawn, and you will be healed quickly. Your own righteousness will walk before you, and the Lord’s glory will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and God will say, “I’m here.” Isaiah 58:1-9a

Praise the Lord! Those who honor the Lord, who adore God’s commandments, are truly happy! Their descendants will be strong throughout the land. The offspring of those who do right will be blessed; wealth and riches will be in their houses. Their righteousness stands forever. They shine in the dark for others who do right. They are merciful, compassionate, and righteous. Those who lend generously are good people, as are those who conduct their affairs with justice. Yes, these sorts of people will never be shaken; the righteous will be remembered forever! They won’t be frightened at bad news. Their hearts are steady, trusting in the Lord. Their hearts are firm; they aren’t afraid. In the end, they will witness their enemies’ defeat. They give freely to those in need. Their righteousness stands forever. Their strength increases gloriously. Psalm 112:1-9

“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again? It’s good for nothing except to be thrown away and trampled under people’s feet. You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can’t be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven. “Don’t even begin to think that I have come to do away with the Law and the Prophets. I haven’t come to do away with them but to fulfill them. I say to you very seriously that as long as heaven and earth exist, neither the smallest letter nor even the smallest stroke of a pen will be erased from the Law until everything there becomes a reality. Therefore, whoever ignores one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called the lowest in the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5:13-20

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

Over these past weeks, we have been returning again and again to the waters of baptism, listening carefully to what the church says happens there. This series, shaped by the official 1996 document of the United Methodist Church, *By Water and the Spirit*, has invited us to slow down and take baptism seriously as a gift from God that shapes the whole of our lives, not just a single moment.

We began by remembering that baptism is first God's action toward us. Before we choose, decide, or understand, God moves toward us with grace. Then we explored how baptism gives us identity before belief is settled, naming us as God's beloved and placing us within the life of the church. Last week, we saw how baptism incorporates us into the body of Christ, binding us to one another in shared life and shared responsibility.

Today, we take the next step forward. If baptism gives us identity, if it binds us into a community, and if it shapes a way of life, then the question before us is not whether baptism matters, but where it leads. Baptism does not end at the font. It sends us somewhere.

The church has been really clear about this. *By Water and the Spirit* reminds us that "baptism is not an end in itself, but the beginning of a life of faith and service." The water does not close a chapter at all. It opens one. Baptism marks the beginning of a life that is meant to be lived publicly, faithfully, and intentionally in the world God loves.

So after this morning, we are not leaving baptism behind. We are following where it guides. And to do that, we turn to scriptures that speak honestly about what it means to live a faith that does not remain contained within ritual, but moves outward into daily life. We begin with the prophet Isaiah, who speaks to a people who worship deeply and yet struggle to see how their faith is meant to be lived beyond the walls of prayer and ritual.

One of the most important shifts *By Water and the Spirit* asks us to make is to stop thinking of baptism as something primarily about us and start recognizing it as something that places us inside God's work in the world. Baptism does not begin with our intentions or our sincerity. It begins with God's saving action, which is already underway before we arrive at the water.

The document puts it plainly. In baptism, “we are incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation.” Salvation here is not only about what God does for individuals. It is about what God is doing in the entire world and all of creation and how baptized people are drawn into that movement. Baptism joins us to a story that is larger than our own faith journeys and longer than our individual lifetimes.

Because baptism is participation in God’s mission, it always carries with it a sense of being sent. The church has long named this truth with the phrase *missio Dei*, which just means “the mission of God” in Latin. The heart of that idea is this: mission does not belong to the church as a project we design or manage. Mission belongs to God. God is already at work in the world, creating, redeeming, healing, and restoring, and the church is drawn into that work through God’s initiative. Baptism is one of the primary ways that happens.

The church does not baptize to protect people from the world or remove them from it. The church baptizes so that people may live faithfully within the world God loves. *By Water and the Spirit* names this as a covenantal reality, teaching that baptism initiates us into a relationship with God that includes responsibility, vocation, and shared work. To be baptized is to be joined to what God is already doing and then sent to live as part of that work, shaped by grace and sustained by the Spirit.

I hope that helps us hear today’s scriptures more clearly. When the prophet Isaiah speaks, when the psalmist describes a faithful life, and when Jesus names his followers as salt and light, they are not describing optional expressions of faith. “Wouldn’t it be nice if they lived like that.” No, they are describing what life looks like when people understand themselves as belonging to God and participating in God’s purposes.

This also keeps us from treating justice, mercy, and service as add-ons to the Christian life. They are not extracurricular activities for especially committed believers. They are part of the shape baptism gives to ordinary life. To be baptized is to be drawn into God's mission before we have fully figured out what that mission will ask of us.

So as we turn now to Isaiah's words, we do so knowing that the question is not whether God is at work in the world. The question is how a people marked by water and the Spirit are meant to live once they have been joined to that work.

The Prophet Isaiah speaks to a people who take their religious life seriously. They pray. They fast. They show up. They want to know God's ways and desire God's presence. On the surface, their devotion looks sincere. And yet, God names a disconnect they can no longer ignore. Their worship has not reshaped how they live with and for one another.

The issue Isaiah raises is not whether the people believe, but whether their faith reaches beyond ritual. God does not reject prayer, fasting, or worship. God questions a religious life that remains contained within them. Isaiah's words press toward integration. What happens in the presence of God must take shape in the way God's people treat others, especially those who are burdened, hungry, or pushed to the margins.

Read through the lens of baptism, this passage begins to sound less like accusation and more like calling. Baptism initiates us into a covenant that touches every part of life. It does not form a private spirituality sealed off from the needs of the world. It forms people whose faith is meant to be lived publicly, relationally, and responsibly. Isaiah assumes that belonging to God carries consequences for how bodies are treated, how power is exercised, and how community is shaped.

What is striking is God's promise in this passage. When faith and life are brought back together, light breaks forth. Healing emerges. Guidance becomes clearer. God's presence is not withdrawn as punishment. It is revealed as people live more fully into the life they were created for. Isaiah does not offer a checklist or a timetable. He offers a vision of what happens when worship flows outward into faithful baptismal living.

This prepares us to hear baptism as a sending rather than a safeguard. The water does not close us off from the world's pain. It places us within it with a calling shaped by justice, compassion, and care. And it is from that place that we turn next to the psalm, which gives us language for what this way of life looks like when it is lived steadily, day after day.

Psalm 112 offers a portrait of faith that is both grounded and outward-facing. It begins with joy rooted not in circumstance, but in trust. Those who honor the Lord and delight in God's commandments are described as truly happy, not because life is easy, but because their lives are anchored in something durable.

What follows then is not a list of spiritual achievements, but a pattern of living. These are people whose righteousness stands firm over time, people who shine in the dark for others. They are named as merciful, compassionate, and just. Their faith shows up in how they conduct their affairs, how they lend generously, and how freely they give to those in need. Justice and generosity are not occasional acts here. They are habits that shape a whole life.

The psalm is also honest about fear and uncertainty. Bad news still comes. Threats still exist. But the psalmist says that their hearts are steady, trusting in the Lord. This is not denial or bravado. It is the quiet confidence that comes from a life grounded in God's faithfulness rather than in control or security.

Read through the lens of baptism, Psalm 112 gives us a picture of what sent life looks like when it is lived faithfully over time. Baptism does not promise that we will never be shaken, but it forms people whose hearts can remain firm even when the world feels unstable. It shapes lives that reflect God's generosity and justice in visible, ordinary ways.

This psalm reminds us that being sent into the world does not always look dramatic. Much of baptized faithfulness takes shape quietly through mercy practiced, justice pursued, and trust sustained. And that steady witness meets us when we hear Jesus' words next, as he names his followers as salt and light for the sake of the world.

When Jesus speaks to his disciples in Matthew's Gospel, he begins with identity. "You are the salt of the earth." "You are the light of the world." He does not issue instructions or set expectations. He names who they already are.

Salt and light exist for the sake of others. Salt works through contact. Light works through presence. Neither is effective when it is hidden or withdrawn. Jesus assumes that life with him will take shape in the open, in ordinary places, among real people.

Read through the lens of baptism, this all becomes even clearer. Baptism does not form a private faith. It marks people whose lives are oriented outward. *By Water and the Spirit* says that the baptized are called to witness to the gospel and to participate in God's mission in the world. Salt and light describe what that sent life looks like.

Jesus then speaks about fulfillment rather than replacement. He deepens the way of life God has already given. This is not about performance or proving worth. It is about living as people shaped by grace, whose faith shows itself through integrity, mercy, and faithfulness.

Salt and light echo what we have heard all along. Faith that moves through and beyond worship. Trust practiced over time. A life that reflects God's presence in quiet and visible ways. This is how baptized life takes shape in the world.

Throughout this series, we have looked really closely at the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, not as a single moment in the past, but as a living reality that continues to shape who we are and how we live. Rather than rushing past the font, I hope you've listened to the church's teaching and allowed it to challenge some of your assumptions about faith, belonging, and discipleship.

We have learned that baptism is not grounded in our clarity or confidence. It rests in God's faithfulness alone. God acts first, claims us as beloved, and places us within a community where faith can grow over time. Baptism gives us a name to live into, companions for the journey, and a shared life shaped by grace rather than achievement.

As the series draws together, I hope one truth has become clear. Baptism is never meant to stay contained within worship. It presses outward. It shapes how we inhabit the world, how we treat one another, and how we understand our place within God's larger work. To be baptized is to be drawn into God's mission, not as saints or heroes, but as real people who belong to God and are learning how to live faithfully.

Being sent into the world does not mean being sent alone or unprepared. Baptism does not scatter us as isolated individuals. It gathers us and then sends us together, bound by shared promises and sustained by the Spirit. The work of living baptism is slow, ordinary, and ongoing, practiced in daily choices, relationships, and acts of care.

So we do not leave baptism behind as this series ends. We carry it with us. The water continues to speak. The promises continue to hold. And the Spirit continues to shape us for a life that is lived not for ourselves alone, but for the sake of the world God loves. Amen.