

## **Power of Presence**

January 11, 2026

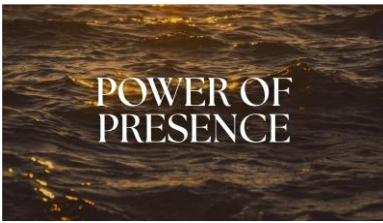
### **Isaiah 42:1-9**

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> He won't cry out or shout aloud or make his voice heard in public. <sup>3</sup> He won't break a bruised reed; he won't extinguish a faint wick, but he will surely bring justice. <sup>4</sup> He won't be extinguished or broken until he has established justice in the land. The coastlands await his teaching.

<sup>5</sup> 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 — <sup>6</sup> 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, <sup>7</sup> to open blind eyes, to lead the prisoners from prison, and those who sit in darkness from the dungeon. <sup>8</sup> I am the Lord; that is my name; I don't hand out my glory to others or my praise to idols. <sup>9</sup> 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.

### **Matthew 3:13-17**

<sup>13</sup> At that time Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan River so that John would baptize him. <sup>14</sup> John tried to stop him and said, "I need to be baptized by you, yet you come to me?" <sup>15</sup> Jesus answered, "Allow me to be baptized now. This is necessary to fulfill all righteousness." So John agreed to baptize Jesus. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him."



Today, on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, we center our worship around the connection between Jesus' baptism, our baptism, and our baptismal identity as the body of Christ. Baptism is not just about cleansing us from sin. Yes, part of baptism is that, but even more so, our baptism is an invitation into community with God and with one another. Jesus and his Holy Spirit show us the way into this community through baptism. This idea of living as the community of faith connects to last week's message about seeing and following the light and to our call to live as the light and love of Christ in the world. As we prepare to connect to the story of Jesus' baptism and into our call to live as Christ in the world, let us begin with a word of centering prayer...

*Gracious God, as Jesus waded out into the Jordan and was baptized, we wade into your Word; we immerse ourselves in your presence, we bathe ourselves in your voice. May the heavens open to us as we listen and receive. May your Spirit descend upon us. May we hear your voice, and be transformed in order to do your will. It is with this hope that I ask you, O God, to bless the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts. You are our rock and our redeemer, our Christ and our king. Amen.*

Have you ever known a polar bear? Not a real bear, but those folks who decide that the best way to celebrate the new year is to jump into a semi-ice-covered body of water? There is always the potential for mishaps when one jumps into freezing cold water: heart attack, frostbite, and so on. That is why, at Polar Plunge events, there are always emergency personnel on hand – just in case. Despite the risks, there are folks who do this year after year. And in a way, they seem oddly evangelistic about it.



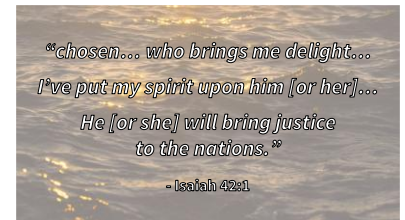
They bubble over with enthusiasm. They want to convince anyone and everyone to join them. And if you just start to look like you might possibly be considering taking the plunge, they will tell you, “Come on in, the water’s fine!” To be honest, I’m not sure that this is really true. Even in the early summer, when someone – through shivering teeth – invites me to jump into the lake, assuring me that the water is fine, I’m a little hesitant. How about you? Do you jump right in, or do you hesitate?



Most of the time I am reluctant. I think that this same thing happens to us, but in reverse, when we share our faith with someone or when we invite a friend or neighbor to come to church or to youth group or to Bible study. They can sense our enthusiasm or probably even our love for Christ, but they are hesitant or maybe skeptical or maybe have had a bad experience with church in the past. An inherent part of us all is the desire to feel loved, to belong, to be a part of community. So, the question for us, in these situations, is this: How do we help people to wade in slowly, in a way that feels safe and comfortable to them?

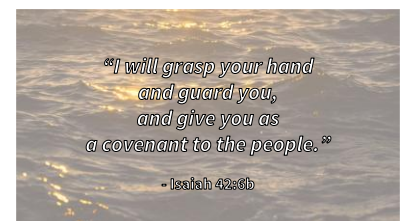
In our Old Testament lesson today, Isaiah speaks of community – community as God intends community to be. As I wrote about on Monday morning in my “pastorjohnb” blog, this passage from Isaiah 42 is the first of four passages in Isaiah known as Servant Songs. This passage is often called an “example passage” because it speaks of what it looks like to follow God. In Isaiah’s words we see what kind of life a follower will strive to lead. We see what kind of person a follower will seek to be. In verses 1-9, we are reminded that followers of God serve not for their own benefit or gain and not from their own power, but as servants of God who are equipped by and empowered by God to serve both God and one another.

As we turn to verse 1 of Isaiah 42, we find three descriptors of a follower of God. Here we read that a follower of God is “*chosen*” by God. We, you and I, do not randomly come to faith. We are created in the womb to be a child of God. And at some point, we step into who we are created to be. That is what we reiterate in baptism as we claim one another for the family of God. Choosing to follow or walk in faith, we become, according to God, one “*who brings me delight*.” Our actions, our words, our thoughts, our very being, when living as a child of God, they bring God delight.

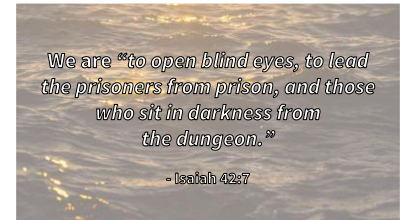


Once we choose to enter into a personal relationship with God, God makes the next step, drawing us deeper into relationship. God declares, “*I’ve put my spirit upon him*.” With the indwelling Spirit of God in our hearts, we are empowered to walk as a child of God, bearing light and love to the world. Doing so, we fulfill that last part of verse 1, where God declares of you and of me, “*He [or she] will bring justice to the nations*.” Living as a child of God, our heart seeks justice and belonging for all people. Our very lives become invitations for others to enter a saving relationship with the Lord.

As we press on in the passage, God defines the relationship and explains the purpose and outcome of our decision to follow our call to walk as a child of the light. In verse 6 we read about God’s role. In the middle of this verse God tells us, “*I will grasp your hand and guard you, and give you as a covenant to the people*.” As we consider *really* living out our faith, sometimes we can become hesitant. As we ponder inviting others to church or as we think about ways to include others, we can be reluctant. It is good to be reminded that God takes our hand and guards us. This presence of God empowers us in our faith.



Being given as a covenant or promise to the nations, God next explains our purpose. We are *“to open blind eyes, to lead the prisoners from prison, and those who sit in darkness from the dungeon.”* As a light to those in darkness, we will open blind eyes,



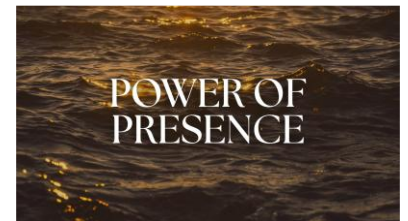
we will set prisoners free, and we will bring light into people’s darkness. I say “we” here, but I really mean “God.” It is God who actually opens eyes and sets people free from sin and other “prisons.” But we do have a role to play. We are to bring the light of Christ into the darkness of people’s live and into the darkness of the world. Opening the eyes of the blind works more than one way. In the more traditional understanding, this is opening people’s eyes to the darkness within them. In this sense, it is helping people to see their sin and their need for Jesus and his saving grace.

Opening the eyes of the blind works in other ways too. For some, we can open their eyes by helping them see how they are blinded to the needs all around them because of their pursuit of material things or power or status or recognition. For others, we can open their eyes by helping them to see how poverty and prejudice and other factors limit how they see, treat, and interact with those in need of Jesus. It is the work of the servants of the Lord to help people see those things and people that they often overlook. Opening eyes in all of these ways contributes to the establishment of justice and to the building of the kingdom of God in our time and place.

To establish justice is to release people who are imprisoned in many ways – in self-made dungeons and darkness or from human-made barriers that limit or keep people from experiencing wholeness and freedom. For the self-imprisoned, it is helping them to see and to begin to live a better, healthier, more whole life.

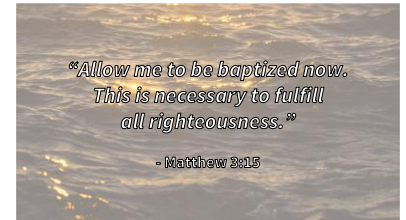
This might include teaching someone how to budget or how to buy and cook healthy meals. It might be taking someone to a meeting. For others it is working to put an end to unjust systems, those evils that keep people trapped in cycles of poverty or that deny people access to basic education or health care or to safe and affordable housing. In our willingness to stand for and to fight for and to work for a more just and whole world, we are telling all people, especially those who are kept down and those who are marginalized by our culture, that they matter, that they are worthy, that we want them to have a place at the table, that we want them to be a part of our beloved community of God.

When we become the presence of God in the world, again, it is God's power that does the real work. Yet how we bring the presence of God into people's lives, well, to be frank, it matters. We need to bring the light gently and humbly, tenderly and with kindness. We are called to walk alongside people, to hold a hand, to put a hand on a shoulder, or to offer a supportive embrace when these things are called for. When we bring this presence of God into people's lives, then we are encouraging them to step into the waters of faith.



As we turn to our gospel lesson for today, to Matthew 3, we see the power of presence unfolding along the banks of the Jordan River. In verse 13 we see that Jesus came to the Jordan so that John could baptize him. Many others came to see John, repenting of their sin, entering the waters as a statement of faith, as a commitment to repentance and to holy living. In this step they were expressing a desire to enter into a new relationship with God, to be made right with God, much as we do when we are baptized into the community of faith. But as Jesus climbed down the banks of the Jordan, John was shocked. John protests how things were unfolding. If anyone was to do the baptizing, well, it should surely be Jesus.

Here is Jesus' response to John's protest: *"Allow me to be baptized now. This is necessary to fulfill all righteousness."* John relents and baptizes Jesus. We do not know why he relents. But we do know he does. Maybe there was just something about Jesus. Jesus did have a powerful presence about him. The power of Jesus' presence led fishermen to leave their nets and a tax collector to leave his tax booth. The power of Jesus' presence led broken people to seek him, reaching out in hope. The power of Jesus' presence caused powerful people to rethink their priorities and to tremble in their boots. And the power of Jesus' presence caused a wild man in the wilderness to surrender to Jesus' request to be baptized.



We must ask, what righteousness is Jesus trying to fulfill here as he enters the waters to be baptized? I believe part of the answer connects back to Isaiah 42. To fulfill righteousness in the context of the Servant Song meant to be a person who works for justice in the world and to be a person who seeks to bring light and love into people's darkness. As a humble servant, Jesus would surely live a life of faith that strove to make the world more just, to bring wholeness to people's lives, and to draw all people into the beloved family of God.

In this striving, Jesus always sought to build relationships, community, and belonging. I believe that is also part of what Jesus sought to demonstrate by entering the waters to be baptized by John. In this action, Jesus was saying that he wanted to be a part of this growing community of faith. Jesus, by entering these communal waters, was proclaiming that his life, his ministry, and his witness to God's light and love – it was all about being a part of the body of faith. By entering into the baptized body of believers, Jesus was declaring that he wanted to walk with and be present to all who were longing for relationship, for belonging, for a place in the beloved community.

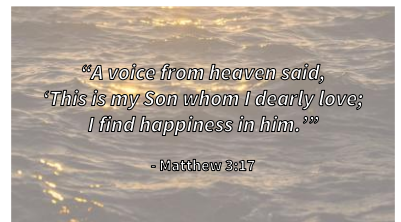


In this gesture of community building, Jesus was also declaring that something new was about to be launched. This new thing was the kingdom of God, a new way of living in relationship with God, with one another, and with the world. By becoming one of us, by signaling his intention to walk with us, Jesus is revealing the power of his presence. It is through this presence that we are empowered to build and live in community.

In the culture of Jesus' day, righteousness referred to being faithful in one's relationships. One cannot be righteous by yourself. We are righteous with God, and we are righteous with one another. So, righteousness then and now implies living in a right relationship. Living in relationship requires us being present to God and to one another. This is why baptism was and is a communal act. As a corporate act, baptisms almost always occur during worship. In this corporate setting, the community is present. This is necessary because baptism is an entrance into the community of faith. It is a joining into the body of believers.

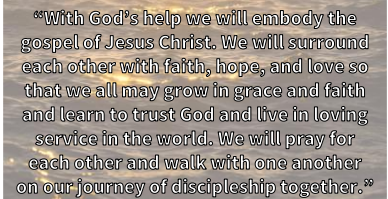
Turning to the last verse of our Matthew passage, we read, *"A voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him.'"* The voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism

connects to two Old Testament scriptures. The first part, *"This is my son,"* comes from Psalm 2, which has always been read as a messianic text. The second part, *"I find happiness in him,"* more often translated *"with whom I am well pleased,"* draws from Isaiah's song about a suffering servant. The combination of these two references suggest that Jesus is the anointed one of God. As the anointed one, Jesus will not be a conquering warrior. He will be a suffering, reconciling servant, come to save the world.





Jesus' baptism places his ministry in the prophetic context. As was the case with all prophets, their mission was not about saving individual souls. The prophetic mission both then and now was and is about calling the nation and world to righteousness and justice. This communal call echoes our commitment made today in the baptisms and in our baptismal remembrance. Here again are those words: "With God's help we will embody the gospel of Jesus Christ. We will surround each other with faith, hope, and love so that we all may grow in grace and faith and learn to trust God and live in loving service in the world. We will pray for each other and walk with one another on our journey of discipleship together."



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My friends, my brothers and sisters in Christ, we are not baptized into a club or some other social group. We are baptized into a workforce, into the body of Christ, into the community of faith, sent into one another's lives and into the world to do the work of healing and righteousness and justice. May it be so for us all. Alleluia and amen.

### **Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. How might opening your eyes to the injustice and marginalization present in our world today lead to growth in your faith and in your discipleship?
- 2) *Pray*. Who do you know that is searching for a relationship with Jesus (whether they know it or not)? Pray for you to be a part of them inviting Jesus into their life.
- 3) *Study*. Read John 1:26-34. What does this text about baptism add to what we learned from this week's reading in Matthew 3:13-17?