

January 11, 2026 Message

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### **Sermon “The Baptism of Jesus: How God Starts A Ministry”**

Once again, good morning, as we celebrate another beautiful southern NM winter day and the Sunday after Epiphany, the baptism of Jesus. For this sermon, I do not have any organic chemistry or archaic units of measurement for you. I did, however, draw on some experiences from my day job as a chemical engineering professor at NMSU and I did indulge my inner history nerd a little bit, so please bear with me.

I started preparing for this Sunday in early December, which coincided with the end of the semester, final exams, grading, and, in my case, the writing of funding agency reports for grant projects. These reports are an accounting of accomplishments in the last year, and the plans for the next year. If there have been any delays or changes in a project, these have to be explained in the report. If too much, or too little, money has been spent, this must also be explained. Finally, all of the accomplishments and plans are compared with what was promised in the original proposal. These reports often involve lots of numbers. For example, how many students were trained? How much new equipment was installed and supplies ordered? How many research tasks were completed? How many presentations were given? How many papers and theses were written?

One of the projects that I am leading is three years long and we recently passed the halfway point. Two years ago, at the start of the project, three years seemed like a long time. In this December's reports, the team and I had to lay out our plans for completing everything. Three years is now looking quite short and our plans for the project achievements seem substantially more ambitious than I remember.

In a review of the history of Jesus' public ministry, I was struck with how that was also about three years long, from his baptism to his death. Jesus had a lot to accomplish in that time. My mind wandered to what it would look like if you accounted for Jesus' ministry in the same way that we do for project management reports. I can just see the columns of metrics, broken down by year. Number of sermons preached? Communities visited? People healed? Disciples trained? Wise teachers stumped or religious

leaders humbled? (My inner rebel really hopes that was an official category.) Miracles performed? Prophecies fulfilled? Downtrodden uplifted? The sheer amount of work is staggering to consider.

So, how to begin such a monumental project as Jesus' ministry and the salvation of the world? My own project had a kick-off meeting where we made introductions, did team-building activities, and coordinated plans. While these kinds of things probably happened with the groups of disciples later, that was not what was needed here. There was not a moment or opportunity to be wasted. The beginning of Jesus' once-in-human-history ministry had to be special and had to be done right.

In some church traditions, the celebration of Epiphany is more than the arrival of the wise men. In those traditions, the baptism of Jesus is celebrated as the main event of Epiphany: the revealing of who Jesus is. The baptism was God's method of helping the people gathered at the Jordan River (and us) recognize that the salvation for His creation was underway.

Today, I want to look at this idea of Epiphany as recognition in three ways. First is the recognition that Jesus was starting his work as a notable rabbi; this recognition is the easiest and is shared among many faiths beyond Christians. The apostle Paul and some of the disciples are often grouped with Jesus in this way. Second is the recognition that Jesus is *The Messiah* promised in the Old Testament. Third, and most difficult, is the recognition that the type of messiah that Jesus is and the type of salvation that Jesus brings are different from the many other would-be messiahs and available salvations.

Let's start with Jesus as a notable rabbi, a teacher highly capable to impart knowledge and wisdom. Over the Christmas season, we heard about some prophecies that were fulfilled with Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and the unusual happenings with angels, shepherds, and wise men. In the second chapter of Luke's gospel, after the nativity story, we hear of Simeon and Anna rejoicing when Jesus is brought to the temple as an infant. A few verses later, we hear about Jesus making an impression on the teachers in the temple courts at the age of twelve. Those immediately around the Holy Family could see that Jesus was not an ordinary child. To the general public, however, the world around Jesus was going to be quiet for a while. Of the time between the boy Jesus in the temple and our gospel lesson for

today, we have very little information. Luke 2:51-52 says, “Then [Jesus] went down to Nazareth with [his parents] and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.”

If Jesus’ youth and young adulthood followed a traditional pattern of rabbi-in-training, Jesus’ 18 or so years of relative obscurity in Nazareth would have been spent working with Joseph in the carpentry shop and studying. Rabbis usually learned a trade to support themselves during their studies as disciples to other rabbis and in their (likely part-time) ministries. For Jesus, that trade was carpentry. For the apostle Paul later, that trade would be tentmaking. In their early 20s, many future rabbis would marry and start families, though some would delay marrying to enable more time for study and preparation—another commonality between Jesus, Paul, and many of the disciples. The switch from student to rabbi would come in their late 20s or early 30s. This age is consistent with our modern equivalent of seminary or medical school followed by internship or residency experiences. Another factor to consider is that we do not hear Jesus’ father, Joseph, mentioned after the visit to the temple. From that, we might expect that Jesus had responsibility for supporting Mary and any younger siblings still at home before he could start traveling. From this perspective, Jesus beginning his rabbinic ministry around the age of 30 years old (as described in Luke 3:23) would have been recognizable.

Starting one’s ministry with a baptism would not have been that unusual either. Baptism was usually associated with repentance from sin. Baptism could be recognizable as the turning away from one’s previous life as a person in training and into a new life as a professional, ready to take on trainees.

Okay, so we’ve got the signs that Jesus is a new rabbi, that he is starting his ministry, and that he may even be noteworthy as a teacher. How to get people to recognize that Jesus is *The Messiah*?

As I mentioned earlier, there had been several prophecies about Jesus’ genealogy and birth that were fulfilled. If those present at Jordan River that day had been in Bethlehem to witness everything, they would have known someone unusual was present. However, even if Jesus had told everyone about his parents and birth story, I doubt that anyone would have believed

him. God wanted the people at the Jordan River to be there to witness and to know for themselves that Jesus was unique.

This is where God's plans for John the Baptist came into play. John was to help give Jesus credibility by being the one to introduce Jesus through baptism. Throughout human history, authority for a new leader has often been established by some sort of ceremonial act done by an existing leader. For example, the prophet Samuel anointed the future king David. The prophet Elijah anointed Elisha to succeed him. Judges swear in new civil servants. Superior officers pin new ranks on junior officers. At university graduations, new PhDs are hooded by their advisors. By design, Jesus was not baptized by just any rabbi.

By the time that Jesus went to visit him, John the Baptist was already well known as an unusual, committed, and shameless preacher. John had his own miraculous birth story. In the first chapter of Luke, we learn about John's birth to a couple too old to have children and his father, Zechariah, afflicted with temporary muteness. John had a prophecy about himself that he could quote from Isaiah, from chapter 40: "A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the LORD...'" Doves of people, including the religious leaders, made the trek out to the wilderness to hear what John had to say. John had his own disciples, including Simon Peter's brother Andrew. Before Jesus appeared, John had already indicated that he was not The Messiah but that The Messiah would come after him (John 1:19-28). Imagine how much it would have meant to John's followers (believers and skeptics) to hear John shout "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) and then to watch John object at first when Jesus asked to be baptized. We read again from Matthew: "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'"

As impressive as the introduction of Jesus by John the Baptist was, what came next should have severely startled anyone there who knew their scriptures. Listen again to the first two verses of Isaiah 42, written some 700 years before: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him". Now back to Matthew:

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of

God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

Even if I were not a fan of John the Baptist and had a healthy distrust of would-be messiahs, witnessing this at Jesus’ baptism would have gotten my attention. This was not something that happened every day. There were too many coincidences, too many things lining up. I would have felt the need to learn more about this Jesus. If I hung around long enough, this feeling would have increased as I heard the stories of water becoming wine, of miraculous healings, and of feedings of vast crowds of people. Like many people in the region, I can see myself starting to hope that this might be *The Messiah*.

So far, so good on the start of Jesus’ ministry with all the right signs. The greater challenge on that baptism day, and in all the days to come, was how to start teaching that this Messiah and this salvation were different. All four Gospels are filled with people being confused and angry that Jesus was not the kind of messiah that they were expecting. Some, such as the Zealots, expected Jesus to be the military messiah who would deliver a political salvation from the Roman occupation. Some, such as the Sadducees, expected Jesus to be a cultural and economic messiah who would deliver a salvation of wealth and influence. Others, such as the Pharisees and teachers of the law, expected Jesus to be a religious messiah who would deliver good fortune to those who followed all the rules and traditions, restoring the prominence of the children of Abraham. The same people who recognized the “voice of one calling” as John the Baptist and the proclamation “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight” from Isaiah, really should have known better.

Listen again to today’s verses from Isaiah 42 about what the Servant of the Lord and God’s salvation would look like:

I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice...  
...a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison, and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

Jesus was not to be a messiah of military conquest, economic power, religious rigidity, or high society. God's Messiah was to be humble and gentle. His job was to be restoration, the undoing of the effects of sin.

The book of Isaiah has three other sections known as the Servant Passages that should have made Jesus' message about the Kingdom of Heaven more recognizable. From Isaiah chapter 49:5-7:

And now the LORD says—he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength—

he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

This is what the LORD says—the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel—to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers: "Kings will see you and stand up, princes will see and bow down, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

God's Messiah had the job of reconciling all people to God, not just the Jews as the teachers of the law would have wanted, but the Gentiles as well. The "despised and abhorred" indicates that social and economic power was not the target that the political leaders wanted.

From Isaiah chapter 50:4-6:

The Sovereign LORD has given me a well-instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.

The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears; I have not been rebellious; I have not turned away. I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.

This passage gives more hints of what Jesus and His ministry would be like. Hint one: Jesus would know and use God's Word. Right after Jesus' baptism, we see this in Jesus' responses to the temptations from Satan. Jesus answered challenges from the religious leaders with verses from the Old Testament. Hint two: Jesus will submit to God's will, even in the face of

situations that are uncomfortable and humiliating if that is what is needed to take humanity's place. At Jesus' baptism, we see this submission. Jesus had no sin and, therefore, no need to be baptized for the repentance of sin. Yet he submitted to baptism, explaining to John that His baptism was "to fulfill all righteousness". Later, the apostle Paul would explain in his letter to the Galatians (4:4-5): "But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship." There would be times in Jesus' ministry when He would do things required by God's law, not because He needed to do those things, but because His job was to take our place. Some of the disciples, and John himself, were bothered by Jesus being baptized by John, who they saw as a subordinate. Jesus, however, was not thinking about human power dynamics; He was thinking about following God's will, so that He could do for us what we could not do for ourselves.

One more Servant Passage for today, this one from Isaiah 53:1-5:

Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces, he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely, he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

As I reread the Servant Passages from Isaiah, knowing that these would have been familiar to the Jews with whom Jesus interacted, I cannot help but wonder how there could have been so much confusion about Jesus' ministry. I feel frustration for Jesus' sake. I want to echo other words from Isaiah from chapter 40:21, when Isaiah is speaking to those in Judah worshiping idols instead of relying on God: "Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded?" I'd like to think that, if I had been there at Jesus' baptism and at the other stages of His ministry, I would have been one of the disciples that "got it".

Then I remember where I have put my priorities. Like the Zealots of Jesus' day, there have been times when I want to be my own boss, not submitting to anyone or anything. I have been willing to hurt and destroy in my rebellion. Like the Sadducees, I have wanted my life as a Christian to be comfortable: to be economically powerful and socially influential, even if that means not sharing the gifts that I have been given. Like the Pharisees, I have wanted to be right, to use my religious training and my adherence to traditions to gain the moral high ground, even if that leaves behind ones that God has called me to love. If I am honest, I have to question if I really would be willing to follow Jesus, or if I would turn away to find someone else who fit my goals and my metrics better.

As we commemorate Epiphany and the start of Jesus' ministry with His baptism, let us consider: What are we looking for in a Messiah? Do we recognize what God is trying to have us see? Are we as individuals and as a church helping others to recognize the Jesus of bruised reeds and flickering wicks? Are we focused on God's salvation or some other kind?

In the coming months, our congregation will have the opportunity to select what we are looking for in a pastor. We will have the opportunity to choose where and how we will use our time, talents, and treasures. As disciples of Jesus, we have the responsibility to continue the work of God's Epiphany to those around us. May we use this time to immerse ourselves in God's Word, to rejoice in the amazing salvation that God accomplished through Jesus and to discern His will for our ministries.

Let us pray.