

## Baptism of Our Lord A 2026: Psalm 29, Matthew 3:13-17

Like the coasts of Alaska and California, the Holy Land lies on a fault line. So besides the long history of military and political upheaval, the region's volatility literally extends from the depths of the earth itself. Eons of seismic activity created volcanic mountains and caused powerful earthquakes. I so often heard tour guides credit earthquakes with the destruction of ancient cities that I started to get nervous that we were due. But the range of mountains from Lebanon to Mount Hermon really do look like the footfalls of a skipping calf. I can imagine our ancestors withstanding storms, earthquakes, or eruptions, thinking how the God of glory does thunder, how the voice of the Lord breaks the cedar trees, and shakes the wilderness, and bursts forth in lightning flashes, as the psalmist says. God who spoke creation into existence reminds us, sometimes dramatically, that there is a power beyond our understanding and certainly beyond our control.

Yet, the Christmas season that we just celebrated reminds us that God does not always choose to act through earth-shattering displays of power. The incarnation is all about God showing up in the most ordinary way, like we all showed up, in the birth of an infant. Luke tells us that God arrived in the middle of the same kinds of ordinary, even inconvenient aspects of life that we often experience ourselves: taxes and government bureaucracy, interrupted plans, hotels with 'no vacancy' signs out front. Matthew reminds us that Jesus was not born to a royal family in a fancy palace but out in the suburbs, where the new parents were not expecting foreign visitors to show up with gifts of gold. The voice of the Lord that *can* make the oak trees writhe and strip the forests bare chose *not* to shout on that silent night.

Decades later, Jesus begins his public ministry not with a bang but in quiet solidarity with the many ordinary people who were coming from Jerusalem and all Judea to be baptized by John in the River Jordan, which—if it didn't have all sorts of historic religious associations for us—looks just like any other river. *John* had been shouting, stirring up the wilderness, preaching repentance, and yelling at the Pharisees and Sadducees; but Jesus quietly shows up for baptism, as if he's simply waiting in line like all the others for his turn to see John. There has always been a little confusion around Jesus coming to John for baptism; even John himself seems confused. If baptism is about repentance of sins, we might wonder why Jesus needed to be there. But John's challenge to the people was less about remorse for individual transgressions than about a whole reorientation of life—a turning point of commitment to live into God's calling in a way they hadn't been living before. We don't know what Jesus spent his time doing between his visit to the temple at age 12 and age 30 (according to Luke) when the gospels find him again, but it wasn't public ministry. Jesus' life is about to take on new direction following his baptism by John.

Because John recognizes Jesus' authority, he hesitates when Jesus approaches him not as one taking over but with an attitude of humility; John had been proclaiming that the one coming

after him was more powerful than he was and would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and fire. *I need to be baptized by you*, John says to Jesus, *yet you come to me?* But Jesus doesn't exercise any kind of obvious power in front of John, nor, for that matter, do we ever hear that Jesus himself baptizes anyone, although his disciples eventually do. Instead, Jesus, God incarnate in solidarity with us, went down to the river to pray just like everyone else. It is a fitting beginning to his public life and ministry where he doesn't assume a position of control or prestige, where he doesn't wield supernatural power except in the service of healing others, where he doesn't use force, coercion, violence, or political or military might to establish himself as ruler. As Jesus himself will say, his kingdom *does not belong to this world*, so he doesn't employ the kind of tactics that belong to this world.

After Jesus has been baptized, we do get a little drama: the heavens open up and the Spirit, like a dove, alights on him. But again, not a cosmic display of power, not a show of heavenly force, but the gentlest inspiration that Matthew could describe: a dove, the fragile sign of peace, hope, and reconciliation. Then the voice from heaven says—not to him, but to us—*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased*. Now, just because *we* haven't been privy to the 30 previous years of Jesus' life doesn't mean that *God* was unaware of what Jesus had been up to. Maybe those years gave God the Father a lot of good reasons to be proud of his Son: good grades, sports trophies, merit badges, promotions at work...But so far as we are told, Jesus has done nothing spectacular to earn this affirmation. And Jesus' life and ministry from this point onward are similarly characterized not by much that would be defined as success by human standards, but by obedience, humility, gentleness, and love.

Our Christian baptism, whether that happens for us as infants, adults, or some age in between, is not the same as what John was doing, nor the same as what happened for Jesus. But when we are baptized into Christ, and claimed as beloved children of God, we are called to live into the ways of Jesus who instructed us to love our neighbors and even our enemies as ourselves, who taught us to forgive not seven times but seventy-seven times, who showed us that the first in the kingdom of heaven is the one who puts themselves last—not demanding to be served but kneeling to wash the feet of loyal friends and traitors alike. We may wish that God would shake the world, thundering in glory and bursting like lightning; the world certainly needs some kind of upheaval, maybe more now than we can ever remember. But *our* part is to follow the one who came to change the world not by overwhelming force but by all-encompassing love. It's the strength to love like that for which we are to pray. Through that strong love, O Lord, give us the blessings of peace.