

# JANUARY 11, 2026

## BAPTISM OF CHRIST / FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY



### ST. JOHN UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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*Ushers –*

(NCH) New Century Hymnal - CCLI LICENSE #11164431

Unless otherwise noted, all scripture texts  
are from the **Common English Bible (CEB)**

\*Please stand if comfortably able  
and respond with words in **bold** print

### SUMMARY OF SCRIPTURE TEXTS

From “Preaching Through the Christian Year” Fred Craddock  
**Isaiah 42:1-9** this reading provides the first Servant Song  
from Isaiah, which has long been recognized as  
informing the Synoptic (*Matthew, Mark, Luke*) account of  
the baptism of Jesus. Its emphasis is on the bestowal of  
the Spirit on God’s chosen one.

**Psalm 29** Emphasis on the voice of the Lord and the  
various ways it breaks through the natural order to be  
heard. It provides an excellent background against which  
to interpret the heavenly voice confirming the identity of  
Jesus as God’s chosen one at his baptism.

**Acts 10:34-43** Peter’s sermon to the household of  
Cornelius, remarkable as a rare mention of the baptism  
of Jesus outside the Gospels.

**Matthew 3:13-17** Matthew’s account of Jesus’ baptism.

### ANNOUNCEMENTS AND PRAYER CONCERNS:

#### THE BELL IS RUNG:

**PRELUDE: “Shall We Gather at the River?/ With Deep  
River” Robert Lowery**

**PENNIES FOR MISSION: Dubois Camp**

**\*RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP:**

One: Come, you who are weary,  
you who have been bruised by life,  
you whose flame has flickered in the winds of the world.

**All: We come, longing to be renewed.**

One: The Holy One who stretches out the heavens  
is stretching us now— stretching our hearts toward  
courage, our hands toward compassion,  
our lives toward gentle justice.

**All: We open ourselves to be stretched into new life.**

One: A voice from heaven says to us, as it said to Jesus:  
You are my beloved. This Spirit rests upon us, too.

**All: We are God's Beloved, called to bring gentle justice.**

One: Come, let us remember who we are.

**All: Let us worship God with joy.**

**\*INVOCATION:** Holy One, Breath of Creation,  
You stretched out the heavens and set the earth dancing  
with life. You whispered belovedness over Jesus rising  
from the Jordan, and your Spirit rested upon him like a  
gentle dove. Rest your Spirit upon us now. Stretch our  
hearts where they have grown tight. Soften the places  
that have been hardened by fear or disappointment.  
Wake the embers of joy that still glow beneath the ash.

Remind us that we are your Beloved, not because of  
what we have done, but because of who You are  
and the love that holds us.

As we gather at the water today, let us remember who  
we are, and who we are becoming together—  
your people of compassion, courage, and gentle justice.  
In the name of Christ, the One who shows us how to be  
human, we pray. Amen.

**\*OPENING HYMN: “Gather Us In” Insert**

**SCRIPTURE LESSONS:**

**FIRST TESTAMENT: Isaiah 42:1-9 From “The Message”**  
**God’s Servant Will Set Everything Right**

42 <sup>1-4</sup> “Take a good look at my servant. I’m backing him to  
the hilt. He’s the one I chose, and I couldn’t be more  
pleased with him. I’ve bathed him with my Spirit, my *life*.  
He’ll set everything right among the nations.

He won’t call attention to what he does with loud  
speeches or gaudy parades.

He won’t brush aside the bruised and the hurt and he  
won’t disregard the small and insignificant, but he’ll  
steadily and firmly set things right.

He won’t tire out and quit. He won’t be stopped until  
he’s finished his work—to set things right on earth.

Far-flung ocean islands wait expectantly for his  
teaching.” The God Who Makes Us Alive with His Own  
Life<sup>5-9</sup> God’s Message, the God who created the cosmos,  
stretched out the skies, laid out the earth and all that  
grows from it, who breathes life into earth’s people,

makes them alive with his own life:

“I am God. I have called you to live right and well. I have taken responsibility for you, kept you safe. I have set you among my people to bind them to me, and provided you as a lighthouse to the nations, to make a start at bringing people into the open, into light: opening blind eyes, releasing prisoners from dungeons, emptying the dark prisons. I am God. That’s my name. I don’t franchise my glory, don’t endorse the no-god idols. Take note: The earlier predictions of judgment have been fulfilled. I’m announcing the new salvation work. Before it bursts on the scene, I’m telling you all about it.”

**RESPONSORIAL PSALM: Psalm 29, Page 638**

**SECOND TESTAMENT: Acts 10:34-43**

<sup>34</sup> Peter said, “I really am learning that God doesn’t show partiality to one group of people over another. <sup>35</sup> Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him. <sup>36</sup> This is the message of peace he sent to the Israelites by proclaiming the good news through Jesus Christ: He is Lord of all! <sup>37</sup> You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism John preached. <sup>38</sup> You know about Jesus of Nazareth, whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and endowed with power. Jesus traveled around doing good and healing everyone oppressed by the devil because God was with him. <sup>39</sup> We are witnesses of everything he

did, both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, <sup>40</sup> but God raised him up on the third day and allowed him to be seen, <sup>41</sup> not by everyone but by us. We are witnesses whom God chose beforehand, who ate and drank with him after God raised him from the dead. <sup>42</sup> He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. <sup>43</sup> All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

**\*GOSPEL LESSON: 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.”

## MESSAGE: “JESUS, THE SURPRISE ACTOR IN THE PLAY OF LIFE”

As Christians many of us have spent our whole lives trying to get to know Jesus and God better. We have read, listened to others, and prayed for much of our life trying to understand what Jesus said; what he did; who he was. In all our studies, Jesus has certainly surprised us in many ways. Have you ever been surprised by Jesus? We pray for one thing, and he gives us something different. We thought he was a king, but he didn't act like a king. We thought he was always gentle, yet he turned the tables in the synagogue when he saw deceit. We thought we were supposed to turn away and stay away from sinners, yet Jesus sought them out. He forgave a sinning woman who was going to be stoned, and exposed those who would stone her as hypocrites. He touched the leper.

If we have been surprised by the man Jesus, imagine how John the baptizer felt when he finally met Jesus, the one he thought to be the Messiah.

John is actually horrified. He seems to have known that Jesus was the one he was waiting for, but why then would he come to be baptized? What happened to the agenda John thought all saviors had? What happened to the wind and fire, to the cleaning out of evil? Surely if anything he, John, needs to be baptized by Jesus himself?

Jesus' reply tells us something vital about the whole gospel story that is going to unfold before our surprised gaze. Yes, he is coming to fulfill God's plan, the promises which God made ages ago and has never forgotten. Yes, these are promises which will bow God's wind, God's spirit, through the world, which will bring the fire of God's just judgment on evil wherever it occurs, and which will rescue God's penitent people once and for all from every kind of exile to which they have been driven. But if he, Jesus, is to do all this, this is how he must do it; by humbly identifying himself with God's people, by taking their place, sharing their penitence, living their life and ultimately dying their death.

It makes us and John wondering what good will this do? And how will it bring about the result that John and his audience, were longing for? The author of this Gospel of Matthew if telling you and I, wait. Read the rest of the story. But we can already glimpse what that answer will be when Jesus comes up out of the water. Israel came through the water of the Red Sea and was given the law, confirming their status as God's son, God's firstborn. Jesus came up from the water of baptism and received God's spirit, God's wind, God's breath, in a new way, declaring him to be God's son, Israel-in-person. The dove, though, which for a moment embodies and symbolizes the spirit, indicates that the coming

judgment will not be achieved through a warlike or vindictive spirit, but will mean the making of peace. Judgment itself is judged by this spirit, just as Jesus will at last take the judgment upon himself and make an end of it.

Part of the challenge of this passage is to learn afresh to be surprised by Jesus. He comes to fulfill God's plan, not ours, and even his prophets sometimes seem to misunderstand what he's up to. He will not always use the agenda that John had, but if we learn to listen carefully to what he says, and watch carefully what he does, we will find that our real longings, the hunger beneath the surface excitement, will be richly met.

We need to learn how to change what we are expecting and to be more open to surprises. Our thoughts are not God's, that's for sure. We need to let Jesus be Jesus, the Son of God, and be joyful as we do it. Amen.

### **SPECIAL MUSIC: "Down to the River" Video**

### **PASTORAL PRAYER:**

Sovereign God, Living Lord Jesus, Eternal Spirit, we cannot tell what life will bring us, but we do believe that you will never leave us, whatever comes. If sorrow comes, comfort us with the hope of glory. If illness comes, help us to bear it gallantly and to reach health again. If disappointment comes, help us

always to remember that in spite of everything, the best is always yet to be. If we have to face a hard task or a difficult decision, make us sure that with the challenge there comes the power to do. If we are tempted, help us to turn to the One who was also tempted and who conquered and who can enable us to share his victory. If we are to be misunderstood and unappreciated, help us always to remember that you know us and that it is your verdict that matters.

Especially bless those who are in trouble and distress not of their own making; those to whom what has happened is beyond any explanation that they may accept what they cannot understand; those who have been led astray by someone else, that even yet they may find a way back; those whose background and environment never really gave them a chance. Help them to rise above their circumstances and grant that we, who are more fortunate, may not rest until we rid this land of conditions in which no one should have to live, in circumstances in which no human being should be entangled.

Bless our world. Bless all those in authority.

Bless all whom we love and especially those from whom we are separated.

Bless each and all of us that we may follow faithfully in the steps of our Lord Jesus Christ until with him we stand before your throne, O God. Amen.

**OUR LORD'S PRAYER:**

**PRAYER RESPONSE: Three-fold Amen 812**

**Amen, Amen, A – men.**

**INVITATION TO GENEROSITY:**

Beloved of God, we remember today who we are—a people formed in water and Spirit, held in love, and called to bring gentle justice to the world. We do not give out of guilt, or out of scarcity, or because the church needs to keep the lights on. We give because love takes form in us. We give because we belong to one another. We give because our lives are woven together with all creation.

Our offering is the way we say: Yes—we will live as God's Beloved.

Yes—we will stretch our hands toward compassion.

Yes—we will join Christ in the work of healing.

Let us, then, bring our gifts—

our time, our treasure, our commitments, our lives—with joy.

**People: We give because we are God's Beloved, and we belong to one another.**

**OFFERTORY: "Baptized in Water" Saward**

**\*DOXOLOGY:**

**Praise God from whom all blessings flow;**

**Praise God, all creatures here below;  
Praise God above you heavenly host;  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen**

**\*UNISON PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND DEDICATION:**

**Holy One, Source of Living Water, You have gathered us in, washed us in grace, and reminded us that we are your Beloved. As water flows from its source to nourish field and forest, so let our giving flow outward—to nourish hope, to tend to healing, to join the slow and sacred work of renewing the world.**

**Bless these gifts, and bless the lives from which they come. May they ripple outward in acts of compassion, in courage where it is needed, in justice that is gentle and strong. Just as the river does not hold itself, teach us not to hold back our love. We offer what we have and who we are, with joy and trust, for the sake of your dream of flourishing. Amen.**

**BAPTISMAL HYMN: 322 "Take Me to the Water"**

**BAPTISMAL RENEWAL:**

**(A basin or font of water is placed where all can come to it. Water is poured so the sound is heard.)**

**INVITATION:**

One: Beloved of God, today we remember that we are a people formed in water and Spirit. We remember that Jesus stepped into the waters of the Jordan, not because he needed to be cleansed, but to show us what it means to be fully human—to say yes to God, yes to belovedness, yes to the work of gentle justice. Today we step into that yes again.

**ACKNOWLEDGING OUR NEED FOR RENEWAL:**

One: We have known bruising. We have known moments we wish we could live again. We have known times when our flame burned low.

**People: We long to begin again.**

One: The One who stretches out the heavens is still stretching us—stretching our courage, stretching our compassion, stretching our capacity to love and to be loved.

**People: We open ourselves to be stretched into new life.**

One: Hear the good news: Nothing is sealed. Nothing is beyond mending. The story is not over. It has only just begun.

**People: All is forgiven. All is being made new.**

One: Can we begin again?

**People: Yes. By the grace of God, we will begin again.**

Silence.

**BLESSING THE WATER:** Holy One, you moved over the waters at creation. You carried your people through the sea and into freedom. Your Spirit descended upon Jesus in the river. Bless this water now.

Let it awaken memory.

Let it carry mercy.

Let it stir our hearts toward your dream.

**People: Amen.**

**THE RENEWAL:** (*The congregation gathers in a circle or line around the water. Each person dips a hand into the water, touches their own forehead, then turns to the next person.*)

Person 1 (touching Person 2):

“Rejoice and be glad. Remember your baptism.”

Person 2 (receiving):

“We begin again. Amen. Amen.”

Both together:

“Nothing separates us from the love of God.”

*The blessing continues person to person, until all have blessed and been blessed.*

**AFFIRMATION OF CALLING:**

One: We are the Body of Christ— not alone, but together.

**People: We are God's beloved.**

One: The Spirit that was in Christ is in us.

**People: We are called to bring gentle justice.**

One: We will not break the bruised reed.

We will not extinguish the smoldering flame.

**People: We will walk in compassion, courage, and joy.**

One: This is our covenant. This is our life together.

**People: Amen.**

**\*CLOSING HYMN: 576 “For the Healing of the Nations”**  
**Tune from 126**

**\*BENEDICTION:**

Beloved of God, you are the ones upon whom the Spirit rests. You are the ones God delights in. You are the ones called to bring gentle justice to the world.

Go now as people who have passed again through the waters— washed in mercy, renewed in courage, and stretched wide in compassion.

Do not fear the bruised reed. Do not turn away from the dimly burning flame. Let your tenderness be your strength, and your joy be your witness.

For nothing— nothing in life or in death, nothing in the heights or the depths, nothing in the world as it is or in the world as it is becoming— can separate you from the love of God. Go in peace, to love and to live, in the name of the Creator, the Christ, and the Spirit who makes all things new. **People: Amen.**

**BENEDICTION RESPONSE: “Let There Be Peace on Earth”**

**THE BELL IS RUNG:**

**POSTLUDE: “I Sing the Mighty Power of God”**

**Benton Price**

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***Stretched Them Out: Service Prayers for The Baptism of Christ/Epiphany 1A*** was written by Rev. Michael Anthony Howard who serves as Minister of Faith in Action for Living Water Association, Ohio North East. Michael's work supports congregations as they weave theology, justice, and place-based ministry into faithful action that bears prophetic witness to God's dwelling among us.