

ALL THINGS NEW!

Isaiah 42:1-9
Matthew 3:13-17

*Remembering who and whose we are,
our spirits are refreshed.*

A sermon preached by
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There are many ways to celebrate the New Year. One that has caught on more and more over the last several years is called the Polar Bear Plunge. Otherwise sane people will jump in lakes, oceans, swimming pools, and other bodies of water in their bathing suits to celebrate the New Year. The phenomenon began in America in Boston shortly after the turn of the 20th century, but cold-water swimming has been an activity in Scandinavia for centuries. Some of the more famous plunges, like at Coney Island in New York City, attract hundreds of idiots—I mean participants. Usually the plunges are associated with fundraising for some worthy cause. The Fort Smith Police Department will be doing a plunge on February 4 at Creekmore Park to raise money for Special Olympics. People who take polar bear plunges find it invigorating, I guess, and they are usually evangelistic about the experience. They will shout to the observers on the shore, “Come on in; the water’s fine!” Not me. No, sir. But for those who are into that sort of thing, the polar bear plunge is a vivid and unforgettable experience of the New Year.¹

I can imagine John the Baptizer shouting to the people who gathered on the banks of the Jordan River, “Come on in; the water’s fine!” Although it wouldn’t have been as cold as Boston Harbor, I can testify that when I went into the Jordan River in February of 2020 to renew my baptism, the water was plenty cold—up to my knees. It was an invigorating experience on many levels.

Our God is all about doing the new and refreshing thing. Over and over Scripture talks about God and God’s people leaving the past behind, looking forward to the future, and plunging ahead. Isaiah quotes God saying, “*Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?*”² Paul tells the Corinthian church, “*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being!*”³ And the final words from the throne of God at the end of the Book of Revelation are, “*See, I am making all things new!*”⁴ Our God is a God of the new thing. As we approach this New

Year, we want to be renewed, refreshed, re-invigorated, and re-energized for service in God's Kingdom.

As we seek to be refreshed and renewed, we need to remember—to remember the fundamentals of our faith, the basics of belief. Refreshment comes when we clear away the clutter, like clearing away all those Christmas decorations and putting your house back in order. We want to get back to the core of who we are and whose we are, and that will restore our spiritual strength and energy.

Our Scripture text today is one of the core stories of our faith. All four gospels talk in some way about the baptism of Jesus. This was a critical event in his life and ministry. And baptism is still fundamental to our self-understanding as children of God and followers of Jesus. Baptism tells us who we are; baptism tells us whose we are. It is all about our identity and our heritage in the faith.

John was a relative of Jesus, because his mother Elizabeth was related to Mary, the mother of Jesus. He had been preaching someplace on the Jordan River; tradition says it was somewhere near Jericho. His preaching called Jews and Gentiles alike to repent of their sins and be baptized. The baptism was a sign of their sins being washed away by God's forgiveness. It was a way of preparing for the coming of the Messiah. John told them, *"I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."*⁵

Sure enough, one day Jesus showed up. John knew who Jesus was, so at first, he hesitated to baptize him. After all, Jesus had no sins to forgive; he was the Christ! John said, *"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"*⁶ But Jesus replied, *"Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."*⁷ More on what that means later.

So John put Jesus under the water, and when he came up, the heavens opened up, and Jesus saw a dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit, coming down and lighting on him. Then a voice from heaven spoke and said, *"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*⁸ These words are a combination of words from one of the royal Psalms and one of the servant songs in Isaiah 42. They identify Jesus as the beloved Son of God, both a King and a Servant. This is his new name, given at baptism, indicative of his character and identity.

Names are very important. In India, the native culture values boys over girls, so when a girl is born, she is often named "Nakusa" or "Nakushi," which means "Unwanted" in the native language of Hindi. This discrimination leads to many girls being neglected or even killed. How would you like to go through life with that name, a constant reminder of your unwanted status? In October of 2011, there was a ceremony for 285 girls named "Unwanted" to legally change their names. The Associated Press reported, "The 285 girls—wearing their best outfits with barrettes, braids and bows in their hair—lined up to receive certificates with their new names along with small flower bouquets." Some of the girls chose new names that meant prosperous, beautiful, good, or even "very tough." One girl who had been named Nakusa by her grandfather, who was disappointed in her birth, said, "Now in school, my classmates and friends will be calling me by this new name, and that makes me very happy."⁹

New names are powerful. In baptism, our name becomes not "unwanted," but "beloved," not "sinner," but "child of God," not "under judgment," but "pleasing to God."

We see this transition in our baptismal vows, either taken for ourselves, or affirmed by our parents when we are children and re-affirmed at our confirmation. There is a transfer of power from the evil of the world to the grace of God. (Turn to page 50 in your Hymnal.)

The first vow is repentance, a renunciation of sin: “Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?” And you say, “I do.”

The second vow claims the freedom of a forgiven child of God: “Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?” This freedom includes the power of resistance. And you say, “I do.”

The third vow is the confession of your faith in Jesus, which gives you a new identity and community: “Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?” And you say, “I do.”¹⁰ As we begin this new year, we are refreshed by remembering these vows of our Christian identity.

But that’s not all! In addition to telling us who we are, baptism tells us whose we are. We belong to Jesus. We identify as children of God, and we are identified with the community of faith. We are baptized into the church of Jesus Christ. We are family.

That’s why Jesus was baptized. He went into the water so he could join the party. He identified with the human condition, entered community with sinners, so he could experience what it meant to be fully human. That’s why John didn’t get it at first. He had been preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And that’s certainly part of it. But Jesus had a larger vision. Baptism is about more than repentance. It is about identity. It is about community. It’s the bedrock of how we understand our relationship to God and other people.

Roy Lloyd, a Lutheran minister, once interviewed Mother Teresa. He said that one of his questions and one of her answers stands out in his mind as “a bright sun burning in my mind.” He asked her, “What’s the biggest problem in the world today?” She answered, without hesitation, “The biggest problem in the world today is that we draw the circle of our family too small. We need to draw it larger every day.”¹¹

The circle of our family is drawn larger in the other sacrament we celebrate. It’s the Lord’s Supper—Holy Communion. Baptism is the sacrament that confirms our identity and identifies us with a community. Holy Communion confirms our community and reminds us of our identity. Jesus initiated the sacrament of baptism by being baptized and then by calling his disciples to baptize in his name. Jesus lent significance to the holy meal by blessing the Passover meal on the night before he died and connecting the bread and the wine to his body and blood, which was about to be sacrificed on the cross. These two sacraments fit together to create the foundation of our faith, the core practices of Christianity.

Holy Communion celebrates the community of faith that Jesus calls together. His presence makes the feast. He is the host of the party. So as Mother Teresa said, the larger we can draw the circle of community, the better. That’s one reason that Methodists practice an open table. We want to welcome all God’s children into the community we experience in the presence of Christ at Communion. Nobody is excluded. Nobody gets left out.

When we take the bread and juice of Communion, we are feasting at the table of community, and Jesus is present in the meal we share. And everyone who gathers with us

and shares this meal is a brother or sister in Christ, a member of the family of faith. When we feel the waters of baptism, whether it's enough water to cover our whole body or just a handful of water on our head, or even if it's just a few drops applied in remembrance of your baptism, the heavens open up, and the Holy Spirit descends, and we are reminded once again, "You are a child of God. You are beloved. God thinks you're all right."

One of my favorite quotes comes from pastor and author Max Lucado: "If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If He had a wallet, your photo would be in it. He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning... Face it, friend. He is crazy about you!"¹² That's the good news on this Sunday of the Lord's baptism. This is the refreshing, re-invigorating, re-energizing message for the New Year.

So here is my invitation to you today. Take the plunge. Let yourself go all in to your baptism and this experience of Holy Communion. Remember and renew your baptismal vows. Receive the body and blood of Jesus. Remember who you are and whose you are. Claim your identity, and affirm your community. Lean into it, live into this core reality with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. Come on in; the water's fine! Take the plunge, and start your New Year refreshed!

¹ <https://nationaltoday.com/polar-bear-plunge-day/>.

² Isaiah 43:18f.

³ 2 Corinthians 5:17.

⁴ Revelation 21:7.

⁵ Matthew 3:11.

⁶ Matthew 3:14.

⁷ Matthew 3:15.

⁸ Matthew 3:17.

⁹ Chaya Babu, "285 Indian girls shed 'unwanted' names," *Associated Press*, October 22, 2011.

¹⁰ *United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 50. <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship/the-baptismal-covenant-i>.

¹¹ Sermons.com.

¹² <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/219593-if-god-had-a-refrigerator-your-picture-would-be-on>.