SERMON
St. Peter's UCC
January 11, 2026
"The Heavens Were Opened"

Scripture:
Acts 10:34-43 Gentiles Hear the Good News
Psalm 29:1-2, 10-11
Matthew 3:13-17 The Baptism of Jesus

Our Gospel passage today begins by saying, "Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him." Jesus would have traveled a good 50 miles or more to get to where John the Baptist was. It's said that Jesus was baptized near where the river Jordan empties into the Dead Sea. Now, if you were to look at a present-day photo of where the baptism happened, now a World Heritage Site, you would basically see a not-very-big creek, but that's because of so much diversion of its waters in the modern era. The river Jordan was bigger in the time of Jesus.

The earliest historical depictions of Jesus being baptized show him standing in the water with the Baptizer's hand above him, sometimes

pouring water on the head of Jesus; sometimes with a scallop shell. Some Christians insist that, where our Gospel passage says that Jesus "came up from the water," it means that the baptism was full immersion, but it's really not clear what kind of baptism took place; only that Jesus came up from the water. Even if it had been full immersion, which is not explicit, there's no insistence in the Bible that full immersion be the only kind of baptism. The Apostle Paul, when he was baptized in Acts, chapter 9, was in a house when baptized.

Anyway, that's just a little background about baptism on this day that looks at the baptism of Jesus.

But now I want to back up a little bit in Matthew; back up to some of the biblical story that comes earlier in that Gospel; years before today's baptism. So far in the Gospel of Matthew, we've heard of the birth of Jesus, and we heard about the wisemen from a country east of the land of Jesus. Then the holy family had to flee to Egypt. Later, they returned and settled in Nazareth, of the region called Galilee.

Suddenly, in chapter three in Matthew in our reading today, there is a shift, a shift in time. The years have moved forward, and John the Baptist, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary, are grown up. Elizabeth, a relative of Mary's, is the one who said to Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

So, John the Baptist and Jesus, in chapter 3, are grown up. I wonder if they ever met when young? After all, Mary and Elizabeth were together when both were pregnant with the children.

But John the Baptist as an adult has gone off on his own. He has been touched by God to fulfill the role of a prophet. He's been in the wilderness, and then, one year, shows up in the wilderness of Judea, the region around Jerusalem, wearing camel's hair and a leather belt. One gets an almost prehistoric image for his appearance. He's been staying alive by eating grasshoppers and wild honey.

Well, the Baptizer was all the rage, apparently. People were streaming out of the city of Jerusalem and outlying areas to hear him and to be baptized in the Jordan. It seems in the Bible that God somehow

gives the voice of prophets like John a power to get the attention of people, and John the Baptist definitely had their full attention, even leaders such as Sadducees and Pharisees, though their attention wasn't always positive.

And yet, in spite of his popularity, the Baptist tells the people that one is coming of whom he is unworthy, even to carry his sandals. This one that is to come will baptize, not just with water, but also with the Holy Spirit, he says.

Jesus comes to John one day at the river in order to be baptized. John humbly says Jesus ought to baptize him instead, for John recognizes him as the one about whom he has prophesied. I'm not sure if he recognizes him because they met before, or because the Holy Spirit recognizes him. Interestingly, John's mother spoke with the voice of the Holy Spirit when she said to Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." And you may remember that John the Baptist leapt in the womb of Elizabeth when a pregnant Mary arrived at her home. Now the grown John speaks for God to the grown Jesus.

The father of John the Baptist, Zechariah, had been approached by the angel Gabriel – the same angel that came to Mary. Gabriel told Zechariah that his wife would bear a child that would carry the spirit and power of the great prophet Elijah, and the child would prepare the way of the Lord. So, the parents of John and Jesus knew these things even before the children were born. Therefore, it could very well be that John and Jesus knew each other before the baptism at the river Jordan.

When Jesus is baptized by John, God says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. It's not clear if these words were for John only, or the whole crowd, but the reader of the scriptures now knows this of Jesus, as Jesus begins his ministry after the baptism.

There was an ancient controversy in the Christian world about this baptism, a few centuries after the birth of Christ. We heard today that the Spirit of God descended like a dove and alighted on Jesus. A minority group of Christians in ancient times, later declared heretics, said that it is at the baptism that Jesus becomes the divine Christ, the Savior. They

apparently ignored the birth story and the coming of the Holy Spirit at that time.

This minority of Christians, followers of a man named Arius, said Jesus was of creation, not of God. These Arians, as they were called, said Jesus was like us right up to the baptism by John. This created such a stir, that the Emperor Constantine called for a council at a place called Nicaea to get it worked out, and to produce one single creed of beliefs for all Christians. And so, in 325, the Nicene Creed was produced. It refuted the Arians; it refuted that Jesus was like us up until the baptism, and it says the following: "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human."

These were strong words meant to clearly, to definitively, put the Arian controversy to rest at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD.

It says in our Gospel reading today about the baptism that the heavens were opened, and that the Holy Spirit descended like a dove to Jesus. By the way, this is the Bible reading depicted in the stained glass window over our front door. But this wasn't the first time heaven touched the earth. All through the birth story of Jesus we hear and see angels, we hear of the Holy Spirit, we hear of Godly dreams, and a miraculous guiding star.

As Christians, we often speak of the gap between heaven and earth, but that gap reads more like a busy highway in the story of Jesus, from birth to his resurrection and ascension, and ongoing, right into the Book of Acts and the continuation of Jesus' ministry through his followers.

Jesus was and is, different. He is of the Creator. We are of creation. He is before all time. We are creatures in a measured universe of astronomical rotations and seasons and night and day. That's what makes the biblical story of Jesus sound so wonderful and hope-filled and magical and miraculous. Heaven came to earth. The Creator's love came to the creation, in order to guide and to save.

Theologians speak of Jesus as both fully human and fully divine, but they understand that he was, and would always be, divine. He only chose to be human for our sake. This is heaven come to earth for our sake. Jesus is of the same being as God. The divine came to us out of love, to redeem and save.

The physical blood of Jesus, born of Mary, was shed so that the divine life that flowed in Jesus could be freed and offered to all. The divine Christ emptied himself, taking on our human form, so that we, though human, may also be divine with Christ; so that we may receive heaven forever.

Thomas Aquinas, a 13th century theologian, was brilliant. He had a brilliant mind. And yet, he once said that, "Human salvation demands the divine disclosure of truths surpassing reason." Certainly, God gave us a brain and the ability to reason. However, as good a tool as the capacity to reason is, still, there comes a point where that which is divine – he who is divine – is beyond mortal thoughts. Christ requests our faith in the divine; faith, because reason alone is incapable of bringing us to God.

Just as it is obviously much better to experience the Christmas Spirit, rather than having it explained to you, so we, as Christians, are to pursue a faith that is beyond mere explanation. There is much about Christianity that cannot simply be explained. The assuredness of faith depends on a kind of knowing that surpasses simple explanation. It's a kind of knowing that must also include the heart and spirit.

The season of Epiphany that we are now in speaks of God revealed to us; a divine Christ. We can believe and profess the Christ of the Nicene Creed. All through this season of Epiphany, we will witness the unfoldment, the revealing, of that which is divine, come into our world. May God's divinity bless you and reveal itself to you, in heart, mind and spirit. Amen.