
Baptism: Waking into new life
Chapel in the Park United Church
January 11, 2026
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 3:13-17 and Romans 6:1-11

Someone in this congregation suggested that perhaps I could try to preach a more conventional sermon sometime. That perhaps I could focus more on the comforting aspects of the gospels. You know. Instead of lifting up the more challenging aspects of faith, which is clearly more my style. And early in the week I tried to do that. Really. I tried really hard. But then I thought - when have I ever given you what you asked for?

Fortunately for us all, this week is the celebration of Jesus's baptism. Surely that topic will not lead us to anything challenging for us, right? To begin, think of what we just read from Matthew about Jesus being baptized by John. What sort of image do you conjure up in your mind? I would expect that for most of us, that scene is very pastoral. Perhaps you imagine something like this:

[image: pastoral scene]

We might imagine the Jordan River flowing very peacefully past grasslands. Perhaps we imagine sheep and other animals frolicking playfully. Take a moment to experience this scene. Smell the grass. Hear the rustle of the leaves in the trees. Take off your sandals and feel the warmth of the soil beneath your feet. It's very peaceful, right? Even Rev. Paul cannot mess this one up.

But I need to ask a question. It's a very simple question, really. The question is, what is baptism all about? But before you answer, I want to show you some images of actual baptisms:

[image: images of baptism and water]

So - what is baptism all about? Is anyone going to say, "water"? I hope so, because that is what we have been taught in the church our whole lives. In classic Christian thinking, baptism also was the doorway to heaven. But the actual action of baptism seems to always require water. I mean, of course it's about water - what else is the font for? It is not for making coffee! Trust me. I've tried. It tasted terrible. And of

course we do use water during baptisms here.

[Go see what is in the baptismal font.]

In some churches they add a drop of olive oil to the baptismal water to symbolize anointing and healing. Presumably to make the water more special. In some churches they add a small amount of water that came from the Jordan River to the baptismal water. Presumably to make the water more special. In some churches, the water is blessed by the minister. Presumably to make the water more special. In some churches they use distilled water for baptism. With the idea that baptismal waters cannot contain any impurities. Presumably to make the water more special. In some churches they use Holy Water. Presumably to make the water more special.

[image: tap water]

But here at Chapel in the Park United Church - at least while I've been here - we have only used straight Toronto tap water for baptisms. Unfiltered. Unsoftened. Un-anythinged. Straight tap water.

There are 2 reasons we use ordinary tap water. For one thing, baptism is really the single most important ritual in the Christian church. It is special by design. So I resist any attempts to make it "more special". Because in my mind that just is not possible. I figure if baptism is not special enough for you already, then perhaps you don't understand what baptism is all about. And the other reason why we use ordinary tap water is because baptism is not about water anyway. It's about something far less tangible, and far more important. It's still about something very common. As common as tap water even.

But don't take my word for it. We can take the words of St. Paul, arguably the author of the liturgical aspects of Christianity. St. Paul certainly knew what baptism meant in the early church. Consider what St. Paul said about baptism in text we just read from Romans. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death. So that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."¹ And look at that - a discussion of baptism from St. Paul with no mention of water. Not a single drop of water. But I hope you noticed the 3

¹ Romans 6:3-4 NRSV

references to death. From St. Paul, instead of hearing about water at baptism, we hear about death. We hear about dying to an old way of life and walking into a new way of life. That is what baptism is all about.

Baptism is not about water. It is only - and has always only been - about walking into new life. It has always been about recognizing and responding to the opportunity to choose.

[image: new life vs old life]

To choose between clinging onto our past, or living into our future. In other words, baptism - at its core - is about healing, journey, and community. Baptism is about living in the present moment.

[image: baptize = baptizo with definition]

Now before anyone corrects me, I will point out that the Greek word in the Bible for baptize is baptizo, which means immerse, submerge, or “put into”². If you want to insist that baptism is about water by arguing that immersion implies water, be my guest. But I will counter with the idea that you can also immerse yourself in new life. You can submerge yourself into new opportunities. You can “put into” your own future.

I find it very interesting that the lectionary gives us these readings today. Because the whole idea of dying to one way of life and walking into a new way of life fits so well today because it is the beginning of a new year. And it ties in with the message from our Moderator at the Epiphany event last Tuesday.

[image: moderator epiphany]

If you missed the event. Let me share a brief summary. It was a celebration of Epiphany. But more specifically, it was about finding new life.

Our moderator, Rev. Dr. Kimberly Heath has already held a number of events since her election last summer. And I love the fact that she is engaging with us frequently. I do not know her personally. But I do know that her doctorate is a doctorate in ministry, focused on preaching. Particularly how preaching can effect transformation, within ourselves and in the world, through small steps and minor shifts. That summary of our moderator’s passion matches pretty well my summary of the Epiphany event last week.

² <https://www.ucg.org/the-good-news/baptism-beginning-of-a-new-life>

But let me take a step back a bit first.

The United Church of Canada has always tried to be relevant to the communities in which we are located. But society has changed significantly - starting not long after World War 2. The United Church has had declining membership since the 1960's. For decades, that numerical decline was not much of an issue, because we still had lots of people and lots of energy. And we still fit our society well.

But today feels a bit different. Society is now vastly different than the society that the church was designed to fit into. And many United Church congregations today struggle to maintain their sense of presence. None of this is news to most clergy and to other leaders. But most leaders spend their time caring for their own people, and have little energy for helping the church envision a different future. And of course, many church members are not really looking for change.

Last year, 2025, the church started talking more openly about our numerical decline in practical terms. And working to help congregations find paths forwards. As I said, none of this is really new. I have participated in church growth activities since at least the 1980's. But there is a more tangible sense of urgency now. Our church - and our National and Regional leaders are all spending significant effort as we collectively decide what sort of future we want. The overall name for this thrust is "Towards 2035". Which is perhaps a shorthand way of saying, "who do we want to be in 2035". That question applies to congregations within the United Church. But it also applies to the United Church of Canada as a whole. Who do we want to be in 2035?

On Tuesday, before the moderator spoke, we heard from other people about exciting new things that some congregations have already been doing. These new activities were all about welcoming new people into their midst. The examples included ways to welcome youth. Also, ways to welcome Christians from migrant communities. Many Canadian cities have large migrant communities. And most of those communities include Christians. Some United Church congregations have made space for migrant congregations to form, bringing new life and vitality to both the migrant community, and to their own community too.

That is the context that the moderator spoke to. The examples of migrant

congregations forming, and youth outreach, were encouraging. But the moderator actually wanted to emphasize something else. She wanted to emphasize that we do not have to copy what other congregations are doing. Those are just ideas. We need to follow our own passions. And take the first step. The moderator compared this to Epiphany. And the call to Mary and Joseph to, “Get up and go, and take the child to Egypt”. With an emphasis on the “Get up and go ...”. We do not have to go to Egypt. We just have to get up and go in whatever direction makes sense.

Mary and Joseph did not know for how long they were going to Egypt. Was it going to be for a long-weekend, or for 3 generations? They did not know. That did not matter. They just got up and went. Our moderator invited us to consider the same approach ourselves. Not to act without thinking. But to not let our thinking prevent us from getting up in the first place.

[image: pastoral]

It was the same thing with the disciples. Picture yourself as one of the disciples. And imagine that you have decided that today you will come forward to be baptized in the river. And imagine that you have just done that. You have just emerged from the waters and are standing on the shore, dripping wet, a light breeze cooling you off refreshingly. How do you feel? Hopefully, good. Do you know what comes next? No. Do you know what the future holds? No. Do you even know what to do right now? No. The new life of baptism does not come to us in a flash. It is something we grow into, we breathe into, we walk into. The invitation to new life at baptism does not mean that we have all the answers right at that moment. And that’s ok. Baptism means that we have decided to move forward. And that we are ready to take a single step in that direction.

[image: every journey begins with a single step]

Given our moderator’s background, I’m surprised she did not speak more about - as in her doctoral work - “transformation, within ourselves and in the world, through small steps and minor shifts”. We likely do not need to imagine massive changes. Many times seemingly small things bring meaningful change. A friendly smile. A moment of your time. A welcoming invitation. The “simple” act of actually caring about others. Sometimes, a single step is all that we need. And besides. We can only ever take one step

at a time anyway.

Baptism is walking into new life. But for many of us, that image of walking into new life seems a bit vague. I mean, where are we supposed to walk? So another way to think of it is that we do not need to walk at all. Instead, we need to wake.

[image: seedling]

We need to wake into new life. We do not always need to create anything new. We do not need to start from scratch. We just need to wake up to possibilities that are all around us already. Because the new life that we are all invited into is in fact already present.

Perhaps “We do not need a new life. We just need a new lens through which to view the life we already have.” And what is that new lens? The lens we need is to move towards the light. We need to look towards where we find energy, healing, hope. We need to go where our energy, our passions, and our interests take us.

The present is not the past. That is a simple fact. But as human beings it is easy to get drawn into comparing the present with the past and to find the present wanting. This problem is made worse because we often idealize our past memories. And we often disasterize the present.

The solution is to stop comparing the present to the past. Period. Yes, of course we should look to our past and relish fond memories. Yes, of course we should look to our past as we make sense of our own trajectory in life. But we cannot stay in that past. We need to embrace the gifts of the present moment for what they are.

This approach can be applied anywhere. In the church - instead of criticizing something that does not fit what you remember from your past, embrace the opportunities being offered here and now. In our work, instead of resisting changes to the job environment we can learn to appreciate the new opportunities and learnings around you. In our families, as family members age and change, instead of longing for the past, we can embrace the gift of each person as they are right now. We can stop dreaming about our past and instead embrace the present that we have.

Nobody likes change of course - except for when we are sitting at a red light. But we do not need to worry anyway. Because most things are not changing. At the

conclusion of this service you know that I will blow out the Christ candle. And I will declare as I often do that the candle never mattered anyway. Because Christ will continue to be present with us, in us, and through us. And I say those same words every week because I happen to believe that they are true.

The new life of baptism should not feel threatening. It is not something that we need to fear. It is simply the process of waking up to the reality already in our midst, including the presence of God in our midst. The water, the candle, these things do not matter. What matters is that Christ is present with us, in us, and through us.

How will we make Christ present in 2026? Think about it. And share your ideas. We have a whole year to live into the answer together. I can't wait.

Amen.