

First Congregational Church of Blue Hill, UCC
Baptism of Christ/First Sunday After Epiphany, January 11, 2026

SERMON - **Embracing Our Baptism**

So, we've just entered into the season of Epiphany, which I think is a really exciting time. Epiphanies are these moments of revelation when you suddenly put something together, or see something you've been looking at in an entirely new way, or have a beautiful moment of discovery. And as we talk about the topic of Baptism today, my hope is that this will be one of many epiphanies we all have this season where we can see something that we've perhaps taken for granted in an entirely new and exciting light. Because I don't know about for all of you, what your relation with baptism is, but I feel like it's something that I've only in the past few years come to appreciate on a deeper level. I'm one of those people who, perhaps like others here, got baptized as a little baby and have absolutely no memory of it. But it's one of those things you can't do over again in the very first, initial sense of it. But that's something else that I'll touch on today. Can you raise your hand if you were also baptized as a baby? Anyone baptized later and actually remember their baptism??

In the UCC, baptism is one of the two sacraments we celebrate, along with Communion. When we have baptisms, there's a part of the service where we generally renew our own baptismal covenant, but then we often go on not thinking about it a whole lot. So, as we enter into this new year, I'd like to call on us to think about it a bit more. What is baptism? I thought it was somewhat entertaining last school year with the outdoor science class that I teach at MDI High School, when we went on a field trip to Somes-Meynell Wildlife Sanctuary, and walked the trail system along Somes Pond. When we got to the pond, one of my students joked that they were going to jump in and be baptized, to which another student said, "I'm not a holy kind of girl, I can't be baptized" and also said that she didn't understand how people could think that just being baptized could wipe the slate clean and just get rid of all your sins. And then another student chimes in and says no, it's actually more of a justification, and it's supposed to be symbolic... and I'm walking along thinking, "wow, this is fascinating, hearing how they process this concept and what they think of it." But, I mean, even in this room, we might have different conceptions about what baptism is, what it's all about. And so, in that vein, I'd like to read you something, another place where baptism came up for me recently. I was reading a book called *The Cost of*

Discipleship by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and in it there's a chapter specifically on baptism, and I'd like to read you a paragraph from that chapter. So, this is what Bonhoeffer says:

“Although for the candidate baptism is a passive event, it is never a mechanical process. This is made abundantly clear by the connection of baptism with the Spirit. The gift of baptism is the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit is Christ himself dwelling in the hearts of the faithful. The baptized are the house where the Holy Spirit has made his dwelling. The Spirit is the pledge of the abiding presence of Jesus, and of our fellowship with him. He imparts true knowledge of his being and of his will. He teaches us and reminds us of all that Christ said on earth. He guides us into all truth, so that we are not without knowledge of Christ and of the gifts which God has given us in him. The gift which the Holy Spirit creates in us is not uncertainty, but assurance and discernment. Thus we are enabled to walk in the Spirit, and to walk in assurance. The certainty which the disciples enjoyed in their intercourse with Jesus was not lost after he left them. Through the sending of the Spirit into the hearts of the believers that certainty is not only perpetuated, but strengthened and increased, so intimate is the fellowship of the Spirit.

When he called men to follow him, Jesus was summoning them to a *visible act of obedience*. To follow Jesus was a public act. Baptism is similarly a public event, for it is the means whereby a member is grafted on to the visible body of Christ. The breach with the world which has been effected in Christ can no longer remain hidden; it must come out into the open through membership of the church and participation in its life and worship. When he joins the Church the Christian steps out of the world, his work and family, taking his stand visibly in the fellowship of Jesus Christ.”

Bonhoeffer goes on to talk about how baptism has a certain finality to it, that it's something that doesn't need to and can't be repeated, because the act is a death to our former selves. It's the visible birth of our life in the Church, our joining to it, so it's something we can RE-new, but it's not something that can ever be completely NEW again. And it mimics what Jesus himself did. It's actually kind of comical when you think about it, when you look at the passage from Matthew that we read today. Jesus goes to John to be baptized, and John is like, “uhhh... what do you mean? Shouldn't YOU be the one baptizing ME?!” And I find it funny because, well, Jesus is JESUS... it's not like he NEEDS to be

baptized to be cleansed... but the thing is, Jesus chooses baptism as the PUBLIC ACT to start his ministry, and the act also makes it clear that God's Spirit is with him. In the community that John the Baptist was creating to prepare the way for Jesus, baptism was the visible sign of the choice to join in the community... and baptism continued to be important in the movement of Jesus and his disciples. And so we continue baptizing with water, which we recognize is really a baptism in the Holy Spirit, which is something that will never leave us, and that we should remind ourselves of every day. After taking some of my seminary classes, I have to say, I started feeling baffled that we don't have some sort of regular remembrance of baptism in our service every week, like we have Communion. Baptism is a sign that we are all, in fact, disciples of Christ, and belong to this community, this movement of people committed to carrying out God's mission for us in the world. It's a beautiful moment of newness, an epiphany, if you will, that we can remember and find joy in. And it's a reminder of God's covenant with us, God's promise to us, to always dwell within us and give us the strength and power and peace that we could not otherwise find on our own in the world. And so, in this spirit, I'd like us to go through a baptismal renewal this morning, and as we do so, try to be truly present in it, to recognize what our baptism really is, and if you were too young to remember your own initial baptism, to try to find a new, epiphanal joy in it.

When you came in, you received a sheet of paper in addition to the bulletin, and I invite you to pull that out right now and follow along.

BAPTISM RENEWAL

Invitation

Leader: 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

Leader: 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.

Leader: 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.

Leader: 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.

Leader: Can we begin again?

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

Blessing the Water

Leader: 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

John the Baptist told his disciples that he baptized them with water but the one to come would baptize with the Holy Spirit. As we receive the mark of our renewed baptismal vows, we recognize the movement of the Holy Spirit within us and among.

You are invited to come forward as you are able. Dip your finger in the water and make the sign of the cross on your forehead repeating these words: "I am God's beloved. I am baptized."

Prayer for the Baptized

Voice, Body, Spirit, we give thanks for the gathering of your people into a beloved community of belonging. By our baptism, we accept the invitation to public and faithful witness to the ministry of Jesus Christ in the world and to be instruments to that work. May we live the baptized life in the Spirit as caring companions of one another, with accountability, support, and grace. Shelter us in your love, nourish us in your truth, and uphold us in your word. May it be so. Amen.

