

Baptism of Our Lord (RCL/A): “the bare branch greens under seasons of faith”: Holy
Baptism
Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17
January 10-11, 2026
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Jon is now a junior in high school. He is becoming an Eagle Scout. 17 years ago he
was baptized in this sanctuary. His mother Christine wrote this poem on that occasion:

Baptism¹

Presented in a gown
of white,
he appears as a bud.

Symbol of sea,
a scalloped shell dips
into the bath of

wind, water –
water beads, bounces off
the precious crown

in a waterfall
and he is held out
to the Sun

where the bare branch greens
under seasons of faith
that brought him to blossom.

Baptism is mysterious. It's mystical. It looks so tame. But it's anything but. Especially
with our modest little font and just a shell-full of water, it looks like a cleansing. And it **is**: a
cleansing of original sin, that hard-wired part of humanity that identifies self as the only god
we're willing to serve. But baptism isn't just a **cleansing**; it's also a **drowning** of the old self
to make way for a new creation in Christ. A sea-change occurs – but it won't show up in any
of the photos. The children will look pretty much the same after as before, except for a damp
thatch of hair. The difference will be invisible but very real. They will have experienced a

baptismal sharing in Christ's **death**, so they will also share in the grace of His **resurrection**.

After I pour the water three times, after I lay my hands in blessing on their heads, and after

I trace the cross on their foreheads using the holy oil, the chrism, I will say:

- "Emmett Wayne"
- "Ember Theresa"
- "Bennett Walter"
- "Lilah Heidi"
- "Nola Rae"

"... child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever."

God loved these children long before they arrived here at Holy Trinity today. God has loved them from all eternity. What's the wonderful picture the psalmist paints in Psalm 139?

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made....
(Ps. 139:13-14a)*

Through the signed, sealed and delivered sacrament of Holy Baptism, these children can draw upon a new treasury of **grace**, the unmerited love of God that comes to us as gift and not reward. Through Holy Baptism we tap into the saving death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. As members of the Body of Christ, Heaven's strength is available to us, and that is no small thing.

When Martin Luther was sorely tested, teetering on the brink of falling into temptation, when he was hard-pressed to maintain hope in the face of daunting challenges, when odds were that his enemies were going to prevail or that he was going to screw things up, all on his own, big time, he'd cry out: "I am baptized!" When we are in a pickle, spiritual or otherwise, we can do the same. We can say the words or we can trace a cross on our own

forehead or we can make the sign of the cross in remembrance of our baptism. To say the words “I am baptized” or to trace the cross, or to whisper the name of Jesus is to put on spiritual armor. When Luther spoke those words, he was throwing down the gauntlet before the devil. “I am baptized! You can’t frighten me. I’ve been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever! A legion of angels is protecting me, both body and soul. I have a cheering section in Heaven: all the beloved who have gone ahead.” As we hear in the Bidding Prayer during Lessons and Carols, the heavenly bleachers are filled with “... all those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light, that multitude which no one can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh, and with whom, in this Lord Jesus, we forevermore are one.” On this Sunday morning Emmett and Ember, Bennett and Lilah, and Nola become members of Holy Trinity through Holy Baptism, but most importantly they become members of the Body of Christ, which includes the Church Triumphant, **all** the beloved who have gone ahead.

As we’re reminded in today’s Gospel, Jesus Himself was baptized. John the Baptizer resisted baptizing him, certainly assuming Jesus had no sin of which to repent! But Jesus insisted that it was God’s will for Him to be baptized. The only sense we can make of it is that Jesus was stepping into the shoes of us sinners. He had already done the unimaginable by slipping into our skin, becoming human, “taking the form of a slave” as St. Paul’s says in Philippians. Now he goes even further, identifying with our **sinfulness**, our **failures in love**, our **selfish choices** that lead to such hurtful consequences. And all that is in preparation to take our sins to the cross, where they’re nailed for good, for **our** good, through His blood.

It’d be too scary if Baptism were only dying with Christ; but it’s also rising with Him, on the day of our baptism, and every day after. Baptism isn’t only for little ones, any more

than “Christmas is for children” either! We adults have all the more need for the lifelong forgiveness that is ours through Holy Baptism. We adults have all the more need for the hope inherent in the Sacrament, and for conscious communion with the crucified and risen Christ. Here’s a reflection from a man of faith whom I never met and whose name I don’t know, but whose witness of faith fanned a flicker into outright flame in his son’s soul. The man wrote, in his later years:

In my own Christian life, these words, which were spoken over me at the time of my baptism, are among the most reassuring words of Holy Scripture. In this sacramental act, during which I also received my own name, I was made a member of the family of God in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. I was marked with the cross of Christ FOREVER! In moments of discouragement, temptations, and even in the face of apparent failure, I can remind myself, as did Martin Luther in his times of deepest distress: “I am baptized!” From the God who gave me this great gift, I hear the eternal words of assurance, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. ... You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.” Help me, dear Father, to remember that I do not walk alone today, but that I may begin and close this day and every day in the assurance that through baptism I am beloved, and that He who gave me my baptism also promised at the same time that He would be with me to the end of the age. In His name I pray! Amen.²

As members of the Body of Christ, Heaven’s strength is available to us, and we become available to each other. This is not a one-and-done ritual, like the Junior Prom. It’s more like a wedding, through which we step over the threshold into a new world of committed love. It’s a little like taking an oath of office, through which we are entrusted with solemn responsibilities and deputized to act in a certain way. We are blessed to welcome Bennett Walter, Lilah Heidi, Emmett Wayne, Ember Theresa, and Nola Rae as our sisters and brothers in Christ this weekend. May we live out our baptismal calling together, in faith. May “the bare branch [green] under seasons of faith that [bring us all] to blossom.” Amen

¹Christine Waldeyer

²Forum Letter (Nov. 2020), pp. 7-8.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

