

**January 12, 2025, Sermon. "BAPTISM: A NEW BEGINNING"**

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

A small shrine appeared on some bare dirt near the intersection where a transient had been struck and killed. Neighbors brought candles, roses, prayerful messages written on cards. The next day the city cleaned up the guttered candles and withered roses and tossed the messages into a plastic bag to be thrown away.

Carly, during a walk through the neighborhood, looked down at the dead patch of dirt. She wondered why a nameless person had drifted along her street.

All that remained beside the sidewalk were windblown leaves.

And one faded rose.

Carly leaned over, picked it up.

She took the spent thing back to her apartment. She put it in a damp paper towel. She made a quick trip to the store to buy a clay pot and small bag of soil. She prepared the stem for reproduction. Her mother, long gone to heaven, had once taught her how.

Carly put the cutting into the soil and placed the pot in her small apartment window. She was careful to keep the soil moist and warm.

Early one morning, when nobody was about, she walked down the sidewalk back to the intersection and its dead patch of dirt. She brought a hand shovel.

Every morning after, she brought a water bottle.

Many years after Carly had joined her mother, those who walked by the intersection would pause to marvel at the strange abundance of wild, beautiful roses. Hundreds of blooms crowded the sidewalk.

It seemed the Hand of Fate had birthed an improbable garden.

Nobody knew where the roses had come from. (Richard Schulte-July 30, 2019) The hand of fate? Perhaps. Yet maybe it was the hand of God that gave Carly the heart to make something good come out of something very bad. Her actions to start a garden in an unexpected area was heartwarming and brought light to a place that was dark. A new beginning!

We all have experienced events and circumstances in our lives that make us pause. New beginnings! Aha moments – those elusive flashes of insight that can change our lives. They are the moments of clarity, when our perspectives shift, and we gain a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us, just like Carly.

At Baptism, we hear about God's abiding promises and a new beginning. We think of God's love for Jesus and for us. We feel his love for us, and we respond with love toward those around us. We are called to find new and deeper ways each day, each season, to spread God's love and justice everywhere.

The world message is so different, challenging our own faith and moral compass. Oxford University Press defined a new word in 2024-Brain Rot. One person in the innovation field predicts that the 2025 Oxford University Press word will be "AI slop." Brain rot is

defined as ***"the supposed deterioration of a person's mental or intellectual state, especially due to overconsumption of trivial or unchallenging material, often from online content."*** Basically, focusing on useless information on social media. Information that creates fear in us. Information that is used to divide us and plants seeds of mistrust and doubt on others.

Here is the good news this morning! Jesus is one of us! He shows up to this chaotic scene at the river to be baptized by John. New Testament scholar Dale Bruner calls this baptism of Jesus, by John, Jesus' first miracle – ***"the miracle of humility." Jesus "goes down with us" – and his whole life will be like this. The God of the universe is not above us but ONE with us, in every way. This epiphany becomes plain right in Jesus' first appearance on the scene, at his baptism."*** (see Bruner, Matthew, p. 83)

We shout out as baptized people of Jesus, ***"Out of heartache, hope. Out of lostness, life. Out of fear, faith. Out of death, life."*** This is always God's way and God's work. It is about living for God, God's righteousness – which is humility and kindness, wholeness and hope, justice and joy for everyone. In all the gospels, Jesus keeps calling us, in response to God's righteousness, to align our lives with God – doing good, bringing healing, spreading hope. Baptism is a beautiful moment that reminds us of God's abiding love and care over us, God's grace sustaining us. But it also intends to direct our living – away from self, and self-indulgent ways, and toward serving, following Jesus

The hand of fate? The hand of God. Carly's light clearly shines!. Darkness came to her neighborhood. And yet her simple act of kindness, let the light of our Lord shine for all to see. David reminds us, ***"For it is You who light my lamp; the Lord my God lights up my darkness." (Psalm 18:28)*** And the Prophet Isaiah speaks out, ***"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned." (Isaiah 9:2)***

Let us make the most of our lives as we live a new life in Christ through the power of his Holy Spirit. God loves us and has a claim on us. Not consuming information that will tear us apart. No more brain rot! Just a brain wired for love. Our lives exist for the service of God – all of us, all our days – spreading love and peace, sharing love and joy, working for justice and wholeness and hope, for everyone. Amen.