

Sacred Waters
January 12, 2025
Sermon by Lori Erickson

As I was surfing the internet a few weeks ago, distracting myself from working, I came across a curious picture. It was from an Eastern Orthodox church in Texas, and it showed their baptismal font, which was a metal horse trough painted bright red and adorned with a cross.

There was so much to like in that photo! I loved how they'd taken something ordinary, and so much a part of Texas culture, and made it holy. I loved the contrast between the utilitarian form of the metal trough and the beauty with which it was painted. And I loved how its blend of the ordinary and the sacred spoke of something mysterious breaking into this world.

The Orthodox Church, in Texas and elsewhere around the world, has another custom relating to baptism that I find very appealing. Each year on January 6, Orthodox Christians celebrate the baptism of Jesus in what they call the Feast of the Theophany (which is a word that combines "theos," meaning God, and "phaino," which means to appear or be made manifest).

As part of this celebration, they march in procession to a nearby river, lake, or sea and bless the waters. This act reflects their belief that Jesus' baptism was the original sanctification of all waters, and by extension, of all creation. Through this blessing, they affirm the interconnectedness of the natural world and the spiritual realm and remind us that all of creation is infused with God's grace.

In places such as Greece, Russia, and Serbia, this blessing of the waters is often a big community event. People sing hymns, recite prayers, and sometimes march in long processions through the streets. In northern regions where January is very cold, the faithful cut holes in the ice to reach the water below. Some even plunge into the icy waters as an act of devotion.

Now don't worry: I'm not suggesting that we form our own liturgical polar bear club here at New Song. But I do think there's much to admire in this custom of blessing the local waters. It takes something old, a Gospel story steeped in history and tradition, and makes it new and alive again. It reminds us that the Holy Spirit moves not only through our church buildings, but through creation itself.

And whether it's a baptism in a horse trough in Texas or the blessing of a frozen river in Serbia, these water rituals remind us that God's presence is everywhere, waiting to be revealed.

That's what happened at the Jordan River at Jesus' baptism. Speaking from personal experience, I can tell you that the Jordan is no great shakes as rivers go. On a trip to Israel a decade ago, I visited the spot on the river that's said to be where Jesus was baptized, and it's not very impressive. As its muddy and slow moving waters wind through a dry and parched landscape, there's not much grandeur or majesty about it. And I doubt that the scene would have looked much different in Jesus' day.

But the power of the Jordan River isn't in its physical appearance—it's in the story associated with it. It's significant that Jesus chose to begin his public ministry here, at the edge of the wilderness, instead of in Jerusalem, the religious and cultural center of his world. In doing so, Jesus signals that his mission will be something new and something radical.

At the same time, it's also deeply rooted in Jewish tradition, because the scene at the Jordan is filled with echoes of Scripture. When the heavens open and the Spirit descends, it calls to mind the very beginning of Genesis, when the Spirit of God hovered over the waters at creation. The dove that comes from the sky recalls the dove from the story of Noah, the bird that carried an olive branch as a sign of new life after the flood. And the waters themselves remind us of the Red Sea, through which the Israelites passed as they escaped from slavery and moved toward freedom.

Jesus' baptism is, in a way, all of these moments wrapped into one. It's creation, renewal, and liberation. It's the beginning of something new and the renewal of something old. And it's also, perhaps most importantly, a sign of Jesus' profound humility. He had no need to enter those waters. He didn't need to repent. He didn't need to be cleansed. Yet he went into the water anyway.

And by stepping into that river, Jesus identifies fully with us—with our brokenness, our humanity, our need. He allows himself to be counted among sinners, to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the people gathered there, waiting for the strange prophet John to bless and submerge them in the water. To the casual onlooker, Jesus probably looked like just another person desperate for redemption, caught up in the enthusiasm of a wild man from the desert.

But in that moment, something extraordinary happened. The heavens opened, and a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." The muddy waters of the Jordan became the stage for a divine revelation. The Spirit descended, and Jesus' public ministry began.

One of the most memorable baptisms I've ever witnessed took place, of all places, at Mercer Pool in southeast Iowa City. It was years ago—at least twenty—and I doubt such a thing would be allowed anymore. But one Saturday morning when I showed up for a swim, in one corner of the pool there was a group of people in white robes. They stood in a circle, softly singing a hymn. At the conclusion of their song, one of their members was blessed and then dunked under the water. When he came up dripping, his face was radiant, as if he had just been given a new life.

In some ways, what was most remarkable about that moment wasn't the baptism itself, but the reaction it drew from the other people at the pool. You can imagine what Mercer is like on a Saturday morning—lots of kids splashing, laughing, and shouting, as well as adults swimming laps with focused determination. But for those few moments, a hush settled over the entire pool. It was as if everyone instinctively understood that something special and sacred was happening, and they didn't want to disturb it.

Because that's the power of the Holy Spirit. She can take a horse trough in Texas, or a swimming pool in Iowa City, or a dusty bend in a shallow river in the middle of nowhere, and make it a

place where God becomes manifest. Her dove can descend anywhere and at any time—but we can only see it if we keep our eyes open.

Let me tell you one more memory I have of a water ritual. This one happened a couple of years ago when the local Tibetan Buddhist community sponsored the creation of a sand mandala at the art building on the University of Iowa campus. A sand mandala is an intricate design, created grain by grain with colored sand. It is a sacred work of art that's infused with prayers and blessings, and it takes days of painstaking effort to complete.

In Iowa City, when the mandala was finally finished in the art building, the public was invited to witness its dissolution. I was among a couple of hundred people who watched as one of the monks swept his hand across the intricate design, scattering the sand. Then another monk followed, and then they invited the oldest and youngest members of the audience to do the same. Soon, everyone present was asked to participate. I remember how it felt almost sacrilegious to destroy something so beautiful and so painstakingly crafted.

Then the sand was gathered into a bowl, and we all marched in a procession to the Iowa River. Prayers were said, and finally, with great care, one of the monks cast the sand into the water. The belief is that the blessings contained in the mandala would travel with the river's current, extending their reach to all waters, because all rivers are connected.

Isn't it wonderful when religious rituals overlap like that? Both the Buddhist ceremony and the Orthodox tradition of blessing rivers affirm the sacredness of water and the interconnectedness of all creation.

And there's another layer to the Buddhist ritual that I find moving. The dissolution of the mandala is first of all a lesson in impermanence—a reminder that nothing in this world lasts forever. Yet it is also a call to pour ourselves into creating something beautiful and meaningful, even though we know it will not endure in that form.

All of this wisdom comes from some handfuls of sand cast into a river. And wisdom flowed, too, from a man standing in the Jordan River two thousand years ago, humbling himself before his cousin, John the Baptist.

Water is miraculous, isn't it? It connects us across traditions, across centuries, across continents. It is a simple, ordinary element, yet through it, we encounter the divine. From the muddy waters of the Jordan to the chlorinated waters of Mercer Pool to the flowing current of the Iowa River, God is always with us, transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary.