Sermon Notes: January 11, 2026 **Focus:** With him, I am well pleased.
Lectionary Readings

The baptism of Jesus is a lovely story of new beginnings. Cousins, John and Jesus, are seeing each other in a new light. In Matthew chapter 3, this is the first time that *adult* Jesus appears. Reading the text, it struck me that there were a thousand ways this journey could have been impossible. If you read Matthew chapter 1, there is a long genealogy of Jesus. It is a chaotic list. It's a laundry list of a thousand ways things went wrong. And yet, despite and probably because of that chaos, Jesus is standing before John, asking to be baptized.

In the ancient world, childhood mortality was a big deal. I am sure Jesus knew children who died. He was one of the lucky adult ones and lucky enough to be able to journey from Galilee to the Jordan River and ask John to help him. While growing up in the ancient world was fraught with real medical peril, growing up in the modern world is fraught with real social and systemic peril (and kids still die too young).

Carlos Several years ago, on the podcast *Revisionist History*, Malcolm Gladwell told the story of Carlos. Carlos was a gifted kid in Los Angeles living in poverty with multiple family challenges. He also had multiple well-connected people trying to get him into one of the best boarding schools in the country. Gladwell talks about the capitalization rate of youth. This 'rate,' in his telling, measures how a society is doing to empower brilliant kids from hard backgrounds. Gladwell argues, and I agree, that our capitalization rate is poor. Disadvantaged, smart kids do not possess some magical bootstrap to success. They, we, need a web of people supporting us if we are going to thrive. Link to show

Houston Brilliance is fragile on its own. When I was in Houston, I was connected to an elite private school that my kids would have attended had we not moved here. They were always trying to bring smart, marginalized kids into the school. Brilliant kids, even with brilliance, even with a private school education had a capitalization rate far below that of the elites surrounding them. Once they grew into adulthood, they often mirrored their origins more than their aspirations. Patronage is not enough. It was not merely mom and dad's income, but the web of culture surrounding the child: either for success or suppression.

I tell you all this because Jesus was remarkable, and he had a remarkable web of support. For him to stand in front of John at Jordan was a testament to God's protection, a family who loved him, a community who shaped him, and ancestors cheering him on.

Turtles There is a famous Buddhist parable called the Turtle and the Yoke. The Buddha says, suppose there existed an ocean the size of this world, and on its surface floated a golden yoke. At the bottom of the ocean lived a blind turtle who surfaced only once every one hundred thousand years. How often would that turtle raise its head through the middle of the yoke? His disciple Ananda answers that it would be exceedingly rare.

Jesus's life was exceedingly rare. Our lives are exceedingly rare. We are here because of a network of people who supported us and brought us to this day. There have likely been a thousand wrong turns, but at least today, you are here and your head is poking through the yoke. And like Jesus, may you hear that you are beloved and may you be baptized by the Spirit to keep moving forward in your mission.

For you maybe life has gone right in a thousand different ways and wrong in so many others. What I do know, at the very core of us, is that we do not have to prove anything to anyone if we seek the Spirit first. I stumbled across this post from Rev. Jesse, an Episcopal priest this week. She was not reflecting on baptism, but on youth sports and the peril of fitting in - sort of the anti-baptism. She has a good YouTube channel. https://www.youtube.com/@rev.jessie.

> My child has chosen a sport that has three-day-long events. It's more of a cult than a sport. The first day I was there, I tried to make small talk and join in the banter with the other Mums. It didn't work. So, I went home to bed early, because I was on the breakfast shift for the cult members/rowers. Trying to sleep, I went online and started browsing clothes. You see, the rowing Mums wear casually elegant clothes. Lots of blue and white stripes. Quietly expensive denim. A thousand shades of white linen.
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> And I bought a striped top. In pink. Because I couldn't quite commit to the blue and white. It does not belong in my wardrobe. The other clothes will be mean to it.
> I, an almost 50-year-old priest, bought a pink striped shirt to fit in. With the cool Mums at rowing. What had I done? The next morning, wearing my actual clothes and not the pink shirt of shame, I stood chopping fruit at 8am and Jesus interrupted. Again. I felt convicted by Him. Again. This is not who I am, and it really is not who He has asked me to be. Fitting in is such a strong lie. It tells us that if we just get the look right, the tone right, the conversation right, then we'll be safe. We'll be ok. Unremarkable in the best possible way.
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> This is not who I am meant to be. When I meet people, I want to know what's really going on in in your lives. I want to know who you're worried about. What you're carrying. Why you're so exhausted…. So, I started asking the Mums questions. Lots of questions. I heard about elderly parents, marriages under strain, and the strange disorientation of trying to find meaning after 40… I want this for all of us. I don't want us to settle for easy and fitting in. Let's do complex, layered and deep relationships. Relationships based on truth. Unafraid of the hard stuff. And full of love like Jesus'.

Jesus had generations pushing him forward, shaping him into who he was meant to be. When he journeyed south to the Jordan, the Spirit was already waiting, ready to descend from the heavens to meet him in the water. Our lives, too, are brief and bright. The Spirit is here. We are carried by the web and lifted when our grip fails. Further, worrying about fitting in is a distraction to the mission. It is like fretting over melting ice cream in July. God is well pleased with Jesus, and God is well pleased with us.

Todd