

Looking into the Lectionary

First Sunday after the Epiphany

Baptism of the Lord

January 11, 2026

Matthew 3:13-17; Isaiah 42:1-9

Isaiah 42 is the first of the “servant” passages — referring to one who is God’s agent of justice in the world. There are expressions in this passage that are as powerful as any in all of Scripture, especially when the prophet says of the servant: “He will bring forth justice to the nations ... a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.”

How many times in the last year have we witnessed abuses of power — such as the grossly unjust deportation of Black or Brown-bodied people or the unconscionable targeting of the LGBTQ+ community — and felt the poignancy of images like the bruised reed or the dimly burning wick? How often have we heard our fellow church members ask, “What can I do?”

Perhaps this is why theologian Kristine Culp says that vulnerability is the pivot of salvation — indeed, the point at which salvation might occur. Culp is not suggesting that vulnerability is inherently good, but rather that experiencing vulnerability can awaken within us possibilities that, if acted upon, can be salvific. Vulnerability can awaken in us what it is to be the church — the body of Christ in the world. As the body of Christ,

we can serve as the pivot of salvation as agents of solidarity and justice for the most vulnerable among us.

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It is most intriguing to me that Matthew's Gospel introduces readers to the adult Jesus in the wilderness. His first "scene" is not in Jerusalem or at the Temple but at the margins. This is tremendously symbolic, powerful and suggestive. Jesus stands with vulnerable people who reside in the margins.

The Jordan River represented a portal experience in Israel's history. After the exodus from Egypt and the Hebrews' wilderness wandering, crossing the Jordan symbolized a passage to the promised land. In the first century, prophets like John baptized people in the Jordan River to reenact this passage in hopes of liberation from the Roman occupation.

The first words Jesus speaks in Matthew occur in this wilderness setting. Jesus says of his baptism by John: "...it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." It's important to note that the word for righteousness here can and should also be translated as justice. Indeed, Jesus' entire ministry in Matthew's Gospel is centered on pursuing justice. In the Beatitudes, for example, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (justice), for they will be filled." And

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness (or justice), for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5: 6, 10). And a few verses later, when he says, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:45) — the word for perfect can be better translated as integrity, or what we might call, justice-seeking!

Bear all of this in mind as we read Matthew 3:13-17. When he emerges from the water, the Spirit of God descends upon him like a dove — imagery that alludes to the dove that returned to Noah’s ark with an olive leaf in its beak (Genesis 8:11), conveying the restoration of creation. Then the very voice of God breaks into the narrative, proclaiming, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (3:17).

It is crucial to note that this voice foreshadows the [Jesus’s transfiguration](#) in Matthew 17, and it is an essential instruction on discipleship. During the transfiguration, a cloud envelopes the disciples, and the voice of God speaks from it, again declaring, “This is my Son, the Beloved ... listen to him!” (Matthew 17:5).

And what has Jesus just said? Immediately preceding the transfiguration scene, Jesus instructs his disciples with these words: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). Jesus is not instructing his disciples to accept crosses or suffering as the will of God — a

common (mis)interpretation of this verse. Crucifying, death-dealing realities continue to litter the landscape of our world, and by “taking them up,” disciples are called to name, expose and **non-violently resist them**. Cross-bearing aims to expose and non-violently disrupt the abuse of power in our world that deforms people and defaces God’s good creation.

All this symbolism — Jesus ’mission to pursue justice and our call to name and nonviolently disrupt the crosses of the vulnerable in our world —appears in Matthew’s account of Jesus ’baptism, which prefigures our own. That is why I believe we should never cover baptismal fonts; they carry powerful symbolism and should always be visible and uncovered. Keep fresh water in the font so you can dip your hand, make the sign of the cross on your forehead, and remember your baptism — remember who you are and whose you are as a child of God and a disciple of Jesus, called to name crosses and stand with the most vulnerable in our communities. Amen.

Questions for reflection on the Baptism of the Lord

1. How do you respond to the powerful imagery in Isaiah 42: “he will bring forth justice to the nations ... a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench”? Where do you see bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks?
2. What do you think of Jesus ’mission to pursue justice in Matthew’s Gospel?

3. How might you and your church community embody Jesus 'call to name and resist the crosses that litter our community and the world?