



Baptism of Our Lord
18 January 2026

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Two weeks ago the junior high students spent part of their Thursday night playing a game where they had to learn each other's names instead of just pretending to know who people are. Even with nametags – the game took longer than expected and at the 28-minute mark I was ready to move on to our teaching for the night. When one student asked why we played the game, I pulled a Jesus on them and answered their question with another question. “How did you get your name?” I asked. The student had no idea how they got their first name. The second student also struggled to explain. The third student said they did not know how they got their first name, but they knew their middle name was from their grandfather. And as is often the case – when one student decides to share – then suddenly everyone knows how they got their middle name. That night was about baptism. We always have to clear up a few things when we start teaching about baptism and communion. In the Lutheran church there are two sacraments and only two. The pastors are thrilled if junior high students can tell us there are two sacraments and not seven or my favorite, ten. That is a lot of sacraments. We used to ask students what they remembered about their baptism but that was a pretty short conversation since most were baptized as infants. Every once in a while, we are lucky enough to have a student who was baptized in fourth or fifth grade and the other students get really quiet as the story of being baptized unfolds for one of their peers. It is often not until a student is confirmed and pictures are laid out on picture boards that stories of baptism come to light. Who baptized you? Where were you baptized? Did you have Godparents? Did you pee on the pastor? Well, depending on the baptismal tradition, some babies are baptized the same way they came into the world and baby bladders are, well, unpredictable.

The story of baptism we hear today brings up all the wildness of the water's edge. John the Baptizer stands waist deep in the waters of the Jordan calling people to repent of their sins – that is, to turn their faces back to God and leave their wandering ways behind. As this story is told in the book of John, as Jesus approaches the Jordan river, John says, “Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Were the words said loud enough for all who were gathered to hear or whispered to his closest disciples? I am not sure it matters. In this moment, as the river turned baptismal font moves around ankles and knees and keeps on moving – the one called to baptize is about to welcome the One in whose name, one day, all will find entrance into the Kingdom of God. It is enough that John knows who his cousin is: lamb of God, Messiah, Son of God, Savior of the world.

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him, and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from the heavens said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” This too is enough.

Whether John was the only witness to such wonders or whether the entire gathered crowd heard the voice from heaven does not matter – the story is told so that we might come to believe in the chosen one of God – Jesus, the Christ. And once we have come to believe, well, what now?

Pastor Bill Hybels, in his book, *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, shares these words: “You are a single link in the chain of people who introduce someone to the Gospel – [the good news of Jesus], and the Holy Spirit has a role for everyone in that process.” This is our answer to the question of “what now?” Yes, pastor, but telling others about Jesus is not my thing. Okay, well why not? And before you can gather your best defense to argue against what Jesus specifically calls each of us to do as disciples. I have a better suggestion.

At the end of December, Andrew Littaritz, a former member–junior high student in the late eighties, contacted Ben Janzow, our praise band leader. “Hey, do you still go to Ascension?” Thank God Ben's answer is yes. It turns out the man grew up at Ascension, went through confirmation and youth ministry, alongside Ben. During the month of December, this guy, now in his early fifties, was laid up recovering from surgery and spent some time reflecting on earlier days. His parents were long-time members of Ascension and as they had both recently passed, he was remembering days of ministry at Ascension that hold special meaning for him. He wrote of families like the Wehmeiers, Renkens, Nordbergs, Kruegers, and Zastrows – families who have been active in the practice of their faith and in their commitment to ministry here at Ascension for some time.



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Andrew spoke of church members who put others before themselves – lifting up their example of kindness, amazing grilled brats, and their ability to share the message of Jesus with himself and his family. He talked of Pastor Frank and Jan Janzow who served here from 1974 to 2013 as pastor and musician and their ability to share the story of Jesus through teaching but also through their presence and the importance of relationship. He closed his letter with appreciation for the gift of the grace of God that allowed him to experience the Word of God through deeply faithful people. In his last paragraph, he noted that he made a donation in the amount of \$3000 for the growth of the ministry and the continued commitment to music in the life of the church. What an unexpected gift -first, this story of how Ascension shared the love of Jesus and well, of course, the financial support.

“You are a single link in the chain of people who introduce someone to the Gospel – the good news of Jesus.” In other words: “you are a child of God” from John, chapter 1; “you are a masterpiece” from Ephesians 2; “you are a temple” from 1st Corinthians 6; “you are a new creation” from 2nd Corinthians 5; you are loved” Colossians 3; “you are chosen by God” 1 Peter 2; “you are forgiven” 1st John 1. Do you need more? “You are the salt of the earth” Matthew 5; “you are the light of the world” Matthew 5; and one more for good measure – “You are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God’s instruments to do God’s work and speak out for God, to tell others of the night and day difference God made for you – from nothing to something, from rejected to accepted.” That is worth hearing again. You are the ones chosen by God to tell others of the night and day difference God made for you – from nothing to something, from rejected to accepted, from darkness to light, from punishment to forgiveness, from sadness to joy, from death to life. You get the idea.

A member of the church, asked me if I would offer pastoral care to a family who were grieving the death of their 53-year-old son. It turns out this woman had already buried one son, and her husband, and was now preparing to bury her second son and last member of her immediate family. On the day of the funeral the outside temperature reached all the way up to 15 degrees and the family asked if I would simply provide the ritual of the graveside service at the end of the funeral instead of asking people to stand outside in the cold. The chapel at the funeral home was packed.

At the end of the funeral, I moved to the head of the casket to speak the words of Psalm 118: “*Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter and give thanks to the Lord.*” I prayed and read the words of the graveside service:

In the sure and certain hope of the resurrection
to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ,
we commend to almighty God our *brother Matthew*, and we commit *his* body to *the ground*,
earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

The Lord bless *her/him* and keep *her/him*.

The Lord’s face shine on *her/him* with grace and mercy.

The Lord look upon *her/him* with favor and ✠ give *her/him* peace.

And then, in the tradition of your current pastors, I began to sing – you know the words:

Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia

Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

When the service was over, a woman walked up to me and said, “are you the pastor of a church around here?” Yes – Ascension Lutheran in Waukesha on Dopp Street, just down from the hospital. “I knew it,” she said. “I wasn’t sure, until I heard you begin to sing. You buried my mother, June. You sang the same song at her graveside.” “You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. You are a single link in the chain of people who introduce someone to the good news of Jesus.” Yes, I am. And, my friends, you are too.

We are the people of Ascension Lutheran Church. It’s what we do. To the glory of God, now and always. Thanks be to God! Amen.