

Sermon January 11, 2026

Blessing: The Serenity Prayer – Reinhold Niebuhr

God, give us grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things
which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.

Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did,
This sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right,
If I surrender to Your will,
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen.

Matthew 3:1-17

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.'"

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all

Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore, every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. 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. And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Backwards Baptismal Promises

Karl Barth, a famous 20th century theologian once wrote that preachers should hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.

The violence and brutality feel overwhelming. And our country is becoming increasingly divided along political and cultural lines. Too many have forgotten the ancient mandate to love our neighbors, whoever they are.

It breaks my heart.

But as I look at the brokenness found in current events, I also find words of hope and healing in our faith and the shared stories that inspire us.

Out of the Wilderness and into the Empire, a man named John baptizes with water and words of repentance and hope. "Someone greater than me is coming soon," he promises. And the people stop and wait. They hold their breath, scarcely able to hope in another time filled with violence and brutality.

So, we turn back to the ancient promises given to the prophet. Promises that has brought comfort two generations of people, facing violence and brutality. Promises like this

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,

Water, fire... natural elements cannot harm them because our God, the one who knows us each by name, travels with us during the most difficult times of our lives. Promises that meant so much as not fire and water,

but soldiers and tax collectors, who were swarming their streets and threatening their livelihoods.

And so they waited. They waited for a King to ride in glory. A king like David or Solomon to bring Israel back to its glory. They waited... and waited... and many of them missed what happened right before their eyes, as John himself pulled Jesus deep into the baptismal waters of the Jordan River. He wasn't what they expected.

The people couldn't see what happened right before their eyes because it seemed so backwards.

It seemed backwards for a young, unmarried woman to give birth to the Christ child

It seemed backwards for the savior to be born in a stable

It seemed backwards for magi to ignore their instructions

It seemed backwards for the savior to seek out sinners

It seemed backwards for the savior to engage with women

It seemed backwards for the savior to enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey

It seemed backwards for the savior to be crucified

It seemed backwards for the savior to claim victory through death & resurrection instead of a physical battle

The whole thing seemed backwards and upside down and nonsensical.

Things only appear backwards when you look at these things from a human perspective. When you look at it the way God does... when you acknowledge the presence of God in each event, nothing is backwards or

upside down. God's greatest actions happen outside of what others see as normal or expected. After all, we are told, that in the first moments of creation, all of this was made out of chaos. Creation itself seemed backwards... until it became something that was Good!

What others see as backwards is God doing the miraculous right before our eyes. But first, we need to follow the angel's declaration: "do not be afraid... God is with you." As we enter into a new year, let us move forward with God's promises ringing in our ears. God's promises do not dwell just in the past - they are with us today. And we find glimpses of God in action in the current events that swamp our newsfeed. God wants us to remember the dramatic moment when God became one of us. A man named Jesus, which literally means the one who saves. Jesus dwells on a Minnesota street that has been turned into a shrine. Jesus cradles a small child in a bombed-out building in Gaza. Jesus comes to us today and everyday. So, let us meet Jesus in these troubled times. We are the ones who can bring renewal and hope, as long as we move forward with Jesus by our side. So, do not be afraid to move outside of the normal rhythms of life and try something new... something that others might see as nonsense or upside down or backwards. It is in the upside down, backwards moments that we see God's presence. It is in these moments that we learn once again that this is the place that God can do something miraculous through your life and through the lives of our neighbors. So lift up your eyes and lift up your hearts because our God is with us. Always.

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you," says our God. "I have called you by name, you are mine."

Litany: God of the Waters

One: God of the waters. Water of birth,

Many: moving us from safety into the world.

One: God of the waters. Water of connection,

**Many: connecting us to the playful Spirit,
the passionate Christ,
the challenging God.**

One: God of the waters. Water of life,

**Many: sustaining,
quenching,
cleansing.**

One: God of the waters. Water of trouble,

**Many: journeying us from here to there,
from the known to the unknown.**

One: God of the waters.

Many: Birth us.

Connect us.

Live in us.

Trouble us.

*You are invited to come forward to dip your hand in the baptismal
waters.*

Remind yourself that you are God's beloved child.

*Take a shell to remind yourself of the covenantal promises found in
our baptism.*

The Lord's Prayer