

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
Sunday, January 11, 2026
“Baptism is Belonging”
Scripture: Matthew 3:13-17
Rev. Irene Willis Hassan

Matthew 3:13-17

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. **14** But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

15 Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

16 As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. **17** And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.

SERMON: BAPTISM IS BELONGING

I grew up along a river in Eastern Washington called the Columbia. It’s the second-largest river in the United States, and some of my most meaningful childhood memories are tied to its banks. In the summers, my friend Katie’s dad would take the boat out, and we would spend entire days cruising in the sun, drinking lemonade. When the current was slow, we’d blow up inner tubes, tie them together into a giant flotilla, and float for hours. I learned the relational value of fishing with friends on that river. We even had a not-so-hidden tire swing we’d jump from straight into the water. And in the winter, when everything was quiet and snow lined the banks, we would go just to look at it, to sit by a fire pit, roast marshmallows, and take in something serene and beautiful.

I was baptized in that river when I was twelve years old.

I honestly don’t remember anything about the confirmation class my UCC church required before baptism. I don’t remember the lessons, the handouts, or the explanations. What I do remember is the baptism itself. It took place at Easter sunrise, and that moment is still vivid for me.

At twelve, I only vaguely understood why baptism mattered. I knew Jesus had been baptized by John. I knew it was something Christians did. I probably could have recited a few answers if pressed. But what I remember most is not the information. It’s the feeling.

Being submerged in that river felt like being submerged in love. It was a river that had nourished my childhood, held my friendships, and given me joy and peace. Standing in its cold water at dawn, I felt hope. I felt connected. I felt claimed, like I belonged to something greater than myself in a new way. Somehow, even without fully understanding it, I knew that something sacred was happening.

I’m thirty-eight now, with a Master’s degree in theology, and I still don’t fully understand God or

God's nature. I don't think we should expect a twelve-year-old with a few months of confirmation classes to understand more than that. And yet, even then, I walked away knowing something was true at a level deeper than explanation.

Faith is confusing. God is mysterious. Many of us have been coming to church for years, reading Scripture, hearing sermons, memorizing verses, and still showing up week after week searching for understanding. That's not a failure. That's faith. Learning never ends, especially when it comes to God. And baptism reminds us that full understanding has never been the requirement.

How much do you really need to know to be baptized? Whether you are a baby who understands nothing, a preteen who understands vaguely, or an adult who understands just enough to know how much you don't understand, God still meets us in baptism. The meaning is not dependent on our ability to explain it. The meaning is revealed to us in ways that go beyond intellect and into the warm instinct God places in our hearts of belonging to Him.

Even John the Baptizer had questions. When Jesus came to him, John hesitated. He didn't think he should be the one doing the baptizing. He wondered if the roles should be reversed. And yet, he stepped into the moment anyway. From the very beginning, baptism was never about having it all figured out; it was about willingness to let God wrap our imperfect selves into His perfect belonging.

Across Christian tradition, baptism is universally recognized as a sacrament, something sacred and necessary. Jesus' public journey into healing the world begins with baptism, and so our journey of following Him begins there too.

Baptism is an act of preparation. It is a cleansing, yes, but more than that, it is a claiming. It marks us as beloved children of God and commits us to the Way of love, justice, and restoration. It is a covenant, not just between us and God, but between us and the work God is doing in the world.

Christians have long disagreed not about *what* baptism is, but *when* it should happen. As a bit of an ecumenical lesson on baptism: for our Catholic and Orthodox siblings in Christ, baptism often happens in infancy. For them, baptism reflects an understanding that baptism marks a child's belonging to God from the very beginning.

In Protestant traditions, including our own United Church of Christ heritage, baptism usually happens later, in late childhood, adolescence, or adulthood. The emphasis here is on conscious participation, on saying yes when you are able. Protestants tend to value personal awareness and intention, believing baptism should coincide with a moment when someone can name their faith for themselves. But even here, we recognize that awareness does not mean certainty. It means willingness. It means stepping into the water trusting that God will meet you there.

Whatever age you experience baptism, whether 0, 12, 38, or 99, you're ultimately just a child in God's loving hands in that sacred moment. And that brings us back to the river and the sense of belonging that came alive for me there even when I was not old enough to really articulate how or why.

Baptism does not require mastery of doctrine. It does not demand perfect faith or complete understanding. It asks only that we step forward, however imperfectly, and allow ourselves to be held by grace. Baptism is knowing in our hearts that we belong to God, even and especially when our words fail us or we're still learning about who God is.

Just as I was held by the Columbia River all those years ago, God holds us in baptism, not because we have everything figured out, but because we belong. On a different riverbank in Jordan long ago, John was entrusted with welcoming the Son of God into His public belonging to both God and the world. And in the same way, each of us is claimed in baptism, named as beloved, and sent into the world held by grace. May we remember our baptism not simply as a moment in the past, but as a living truth that continues to hold us in love through every season of life.

Amen.

So our discussion question today is:

What was your baptism like, and what feelings did it bring up for you?

Or, if you're not baptised yet, what does it mean to "belong" somewhere?

If you'd rather not join in the discussion and instead quietly pray or contemplate the questions on your own, please sit at the area in front of the piano. Bibles, notepads, and candles have been left there for private connection with God. Please do not interrupt people who are praying alone there.