

# What Is Our Identity?

BAPTISM OF OUR LORD  
THE REV. KATHLEEN D. R. HARKNESS



January 11, 2026  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church  
of Springfield Township,  
in Bucks County, PA

2170 Route 212  
Coopersburg, PA 18036  
610-346-7282

## Matthew 3:13-17

*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."*

---

A mother and her 5-year-old son were shopping. The mother was intent on looking at dresses and blouses. The son wanted to visit the toy department. He kept pulling on her sleeve saying, "Come on, Mom, come on!" After repeated attempts to move his mother out of the women's department, the boy decided he would strike out on his own.

It took the mother a few minutes to notice her boy was missing. When she finally realized he was gone she was both angry and frightened. She made her way to the toy area as quickly as she could. Sure enough, there he son was. The mother came up beside him, took his arm in her hand, and said harshly, "Who do you think you are?"

It's a question full of meaning. It presumes an identity that carries with it certain expectations, as well as prohibitions. In the case of the little boy in the story, the question intended to convey the message, "I am the parent, you are the child. You don't leave without my permission." The question also conveys a deeper understanding about the nature of the relationship between mother and child. It reminds the child that being a part of the family carries with it certain responsibilities and roles

to fulfill. This deeper message might sound like, *“People who love and respect each other are careful not to cause them harm or fear.”*

So now what I want you to ask yourself is: What is your identity? Who do YOU think you are?

If you asked me this question, I might first say: I'm a beloved child of God. I am your pastor. I am called and empowered by God to serve this congregation. I am also a wife, mother, sister, and aunt. I am a member of SEPA Synod, on the Council of the Upper Bucks Conference, SEPA Antiracism Team and Vitality Team. I am a singer with the BCCS, a lion with the Lion's Club of Springfield Township. Also, a reader with my neighborhood book club. These identities require certain obligations and expectations.

Now, if I were to ask you right now. What would you say? (People from congregation answered.)

The Epiphany season seems an appropriate time to shed some light on the way in God reveals who Jesus is. Matthew reveals who Jesus is in the first chapters of his gospel. He tells us how deeply rooted Jesus' life is in the troubled history of humanity through Jesus' genealogy. He is descended from Abraham.

Of the few females listed, there is **Tamar**. She was the daughter-in-law of the patriarch Judah. She disguises herself as a prostitute to seduce Judah. She secures his signet ring, cord, and staff as collateral for payment. When Judah discovers she is pregnant, he orders her killed. But she produces these items to prove he is the father. Her story is central to the preservation of the lineage of Jesus.

**Rahab** was a Canaanite prostitute in Jericho. She became a heroine by hiding Israelite spies, demonstrating faith in God. She lies to the king's men and helps the spies to escape. They lead her and her household to safety and they are spared when Jericho falls. She becomes an ancestor of King David and Jesus. She is remembered as a model of faith, redemption, and God's grace.

**Ruth**, a Moabite woman marries a Judean immigrant named Mahlon. Upon his death, she becomes a childless widow who chooses to accompany her mother-in-law, Naomi, to Judah.

**The wife of Uriah (Bathsheba)** was a woman who King David lusted after. She became pregnant by him. David had one of his soldiers put Uriah in a position in battle where he would be killed before he could discover that David had gotten his wife pregnant.

And of course there is **Mary**, Jesus' mother. She is a 14-year-old girl who is betrothed to Joseph and becomes pregnant before their marriage.

People usually try to conceal such things in their family trees, but Matthew calls our attention to them in Jesus' ancestry. Jesus' genealogy does more than merely trace lineage. It serves as a reminder of the stories and experiences that shape a culture, a faith, and a people. It provides stories of resilience like Ruth's. Stories of violence like Tamar's. It also memorializes collective experiences such as the Babylonian deportation.

These generations, with their historical anomalies, remind Jesus that as he enters the Jordan River, he does so guided by the faith of ancestors who came before him. Similarly, our baptism connects us to Jesus along with the broader genealogy of creation. Lutherans recount in our baptismal liturgy:

*We give you thanks, O God, for in the beginning your Spirit moved over the waters and by your Word you created the world, calling forth life in which you took delight. Through the waters of the flood you delivered Noah and his family, and through the sea you led your people Israel from slavery into freedom. At the river your Son was baptized by John and anointed with the Holy Spirit. By the baptism of Jesus 'death and resurrection you set us free from the power of sin and death and raise us up to live in you.*

Next, we learn about Jesus' identity in light

of his baptism. Jesus, now an adult, affirms this identity and commission. He goes to John to be baptized. Is he a follower of John? Scholars think so. Jesus demands to be baptized by John. His desire for baptism is an expression of his commitment to live in accordance to God's will. He says to John, "*Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.*" What Jesus reveals in this statement is that he will be the agent of God's saving presence. Fulfilling righteousness means his actions are consistent with a faithful relationship and commitment to God. He will be faithful to his God-given commission and act as God's saving presence that the angel announced to Joseph about Jesus' conception. At first John is taken aback by Jesus' request. He says to Jesus, "*I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?*" John realizes Jesus is greater than he is. But he agrees to baptize Jesus, nonetheless.

The climax of the scene is not the baptism itself but the vision and encounter as Jesus comes up from the water. The heavens open. A divine revelation happens. Jesus sees the Spirit descending on him like a dove, equipping him for ministry. This image signifies Jesus' destiny as one of powerful and imperial figure. Yet, his power and identity as an imperial figure is not like that of this world. God confirms Jesus' identity and commitment saying, "*This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*" In the subsequent scene, Jesus' temptation, his commitment is tested. But Jesus remains resolute in his identity as God's agent.

So now I ask you: *How are we different because of our baptisms?* How our baptism expressed in our daily lives? Can anyone answer these questions? The story of the beginning of the Christian community's mission of making disciples is told in the Book of Acts. Baptism became the common way in which those who believed the message of the apostles and accepted the new faith were received as members of the Christian community. The baptismal "washing" can be seen as a sign of cleansing from within. But Paul spoke of a deeper symbolism when he told Roman Christians that "*all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.*" Baptism can then be seen as the death of the old sinful self and a resurrection to a new life of faith in Christ. Jesus' baptism is also about our baptism. Jesus' discovery of his identity and mission is also about the discovery of our identity and mission. Our calling as his followers is intimately tied to our acceptance of the idea that we follow him. What does this mean in practical terms? For one thing, as Jesus identified with sinners in submitting to baptism, our baptism helps remind us of those with whom we stand. We are not part of some elite spiritual corps. We are not baptized as super-saints.

Our experience with the water reminds us that we take our stand with and for sinners. We identify with them because we are one of them. But our baptism also identifies us with Jesus. His calling becomes our calling. His mission becomes our mission. His identity becomes the source for our own identity. Whatever other designations we might have been attached to, are abandoned in favor of a new name: a follower of Christ. Our baptisms are thus a benchmark for us. Baptism is an experience we use to renew our purpose or to regain our balance. This is one reason the Christian calendar takes us back to the baptism of the Lord year after year. It is the well-spring that feeds our lives and nourishes our purpose. It is the place where we renew our experience of forgiveness and renew our commitment to our calling.

So, what is our identity? We are first and foremost beloved children of God. How our baptism expressed in our daily lives? We walk in the way of Christ enlightened and empowered by the Spirit to love and serve God and the world.

In Jesus' name, amen.