

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

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## Baptism as Collective Liberation

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

We gather today at the water's edge. Yet, this is not a calm or still pool. These are troubled waters. Churning waters, sending foam and spray all around. Waters of change and transformation, waters that challenge us to move beyond our current state.

Baptism, the ancient ritual we remember today, is more than an individual religious milestone or a private transaction between a soul and God. It is a collective act that challenges our assumptions about power, community, and belonging.

Baptism invites us into a long lineage of what the enfleshed commentary describes as “liberationist unfoldings,” in which we resist imperial systems and seek the flourishing of all creation. This is sacred, challenging, and revolutionary work.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized this reality. Writing from a Nazi prison cell, he taught that in baptism, “God is love” becomes the enduring foundation for a life that “contradicts everything visible, understandable, and able to be experienced” in a world intoxicated by power. (Gruchy, 1984, pp. 445-456) Baptism renders us foolish to worldly standards, threatening to oppressive systems, and ultimately, free.

So let us go to the Jordan River, where our teacher, Jesus, wades into the waters with his cousin, John. This moment has puzzled Christians for centuries. Why would the sinless Son of God submit to a baptism of repentance? What could Jesus possibly need to repent of?

However, it is a misunderstanding to believe Jesus approached the Jordan for personal cleansing. He entered those waters to join the narrative of a people living under Roman oppression, to stand in solidarity with the marginalized and the

occupied. When Jesus stepped into the Jordan, he wasn't just joining a prayer circle; he was joining a movement already under state surveillance. A movement whose leader, John, will be beheaded by the state.

Jesus didn't need to be baptized. He needed baptism to become one with us, with all who cry out under the weight of empire, all who long for liberation, all who dare to imagine God's kin-dom breaking into this broken world.

In Acts 10, Peter comes to understand the significance of the Jordan event. He recognizes that baptism represents "a theological, spiritual, political, relational transformation" away from "the oppressive forces" of empire and toward the God of Israel. (DeJonge, n.d.) This transformation is not only of the heart, but also of our loyalties, allegiances, and entire way of being.

Bonhoeffer understood the cost of this conversion. He wrote that following Christ demands "a clear No to all injustice, to all evil... to all oppression and violation of the weak and the poor." Affirming God inherently means rejecting state-sanctioned harm. Bonhoeffer ultimately paid for this stance with his life, executed by the Nazis just days before the prison camp was liberated.

But before he died, he had already proclaimed: "Fear is overcome."

Fear is overcome. So we dare to speak truth.

We must name what too many churches refuse to: Where Christianity holds hands with violence—we say, 'no more!' We look squarely at the suffering Christianity has caused when co-opted by domination and repent.

Beloveds, we live in a time when our faith is weaponized. The cross, once an instrument of state execution and tragedy, has been transformed into a symbol of nationalism, exclusion, and dominance rather than shared power. Christian rhetoric is too often used to justify weapons instead of plowshares, violence instead of tenderness, and systems of harm instead of networks of compassion.

Bonhoeffer's words ring across the decades: "The church stands or falls by its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness, and pride of power." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer – 24 quotations, n.d.)

Do you hear that? The church's foundation is not measured by the size of its buildings or budgets, nor by its political influence or social respectability. Rather, the church stands or falls by its revolutionary protest.

This is the call embedded in our baptism: to speak out against unjust systems, to reject complicity, and to embody what Bonhoeffer described as “a brave No to anything that hinders serving God alone,” including national pride, worldly honor, and the comfort of silence. (The Word: Liberating and Free – Sermons – Catonsville Presbyterian Church, 2022)

When attorneys general request lists of people who have transitioned for purposes we know are violent and dehumanizing, baptism calls us to say No.

When pipelines threaten sacred lands and Indigenous sovereignty, baptism calls us to say No.

When ICE agents black-bag and even murder people, baptism calls us to say No.

When prisons become warehouses for the poor and mentally ill, when policing perpetuates anti-Black violence, when capitalism extracts and exploits until the planet burns—baptism calls us to say No.

But what does this No look like lived out? How do we move from resistance to transformation?

Here baptism becomes truly revolutionary. In these waters, God establishes what Bonhoeffer called “a new order of values,” an inverted kingdom where strength is seen as imperfect and, in the eyes of Christ, weakness is considered perfect. (Fit for the Feast: Bonhoeffer and Baptism, 2026)

Listen to Bonhoeffer again: “Not the powerful is in the right, but ultimately the weak is always in the right.” (Thompson, 2024)

The weak are always in the right, not because weakness is inherently virtuous, but because God chooses to stand with the weak, the oppressed, and the crucified. Jesus did not baptize others; he was baptized, aligning himself with the vulnerable, the seekers, and those who hunger for justice.

This is the scandal of Acts 10, Peter’s entire theology is overturned when he realizes that God shows no partiality—not a superficial “everyone is the same”

impartiality, but a radical grace that transcends boundaries and forms unexpected coalitions among those seeking liberation.

God's grace in Acts 10 co-mingles with a God who is angry for their people, who remembers the oppressed, who opens their heart even to former enemies when those enemies transform. Peter discovers that God's people aren't defined by rigid identity markers but by a shared commitment to fear God and practice righteousness, to align with the revolution of the Intimate, the movement of love.

Dr. Willie James Jennings reminds us: "We're inside of a Gospel story [that] has to do with us joining the story of another people." (Jennings, 2021) Jews and Gentiles. Black and white. Documented and undocumented. Cisgender and transgender. Binary and nonbinary. All baptized into one movement, one struggle, one hope for collective liberation.

Bonhoeffer wrote: "We are called to seize and stop the wheel of state oppression and aid those crushed by its movement." Not to oil the wheel. Not to make it turn more smoothly. To stop it. To seize it with our bodies if necessary. To refuse its crushing logic. (DeJonge, n.d.)

This is the strength that comes through weakness. The power that flows from solidarity with the powerless.

So here we are, beloveds. Standing at the water's edge and remembering our baptism and troubling these waters once again.

What does it mean to abide in the love of baptism? Bonhoeffer tells us plainly: it means taking a path that is "foreign and incomprehensible to the world." A foolish path. A cruciform path. A path where we look for the "outstretched, begging hands" of the marginalized and see in them the very face of Christ. (Virginia Smith's Homilies, n.d.)

Grace Lee Boggs asked: "What time is it on the clock of the world?" (Boggs, 2015)

Beloveds, it is time for a new theology of change. It is time for unexpected coalitions, to let go of rigid frameworks, and to open ourselves to the Spirit's movement in unforeseen places. It is time to embrace what the enfleshed liturgy calls "a future of ease and interdependence," rather than the exhausting, extractive logic of empire we have inherited.

And in this time, fear is overcome.

Fear is overcome because we are not alone. We are baptized into a movement that stretches back to Jesus in the Jordan, to the prophets of Israel, to the tree-huggers of ancient India who wrapped their arms around the sacred khejri trees. We are baptized into a movement that stretches forward to every generation that will trouble these waters after us.

Fear is overcome because God's steadfast love calls us not into shame, but transformation. Not toward despair, but toward accountability. Not to individual piety, but to collective liberation.

Remember: you have been baptized. You belong to Christ. You belong to the movement of love. And in the face of every empire, every injustice, every crushing wheel of oppression—

Fear is overcome.

Amen.