Sermon for Sunday, 11 January 2026 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
First Sunday after Epiphany/Baptism of the Lord
Scriptures: Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalter: Psalm 29 (Page 761, UMH) ; Acts 10:34043; Matthew 3:13-17

Sermon: On this first Sunday after the Epiphany, it is customary to commemorate the baptism of Jesus and the celebration of our own baptismal vows, which were said either by ourselves or those who spoke for us, such as our parents.

The scriptures relate to foundational events in the life of Israel and the church Today's reading from Isaiah stresses the choice of Israel as the servant of God, or the nations, or the representative group chosen to follow God's purposes.

The second reading, Psalm 29, represents the voice of God confirming the direction of God's ordained, or chosen, people, carrying out the aim of justice and peace that creation is all about.

The third lesson, from the Book of Acts, focusses on the baptism of Jesus. This year it has Peter speaking to the Roman soldier Cornelius and his household, illustrating that Gentiles are also welcomed into the church founded by the Jewish Jesus and his Jewish disciples.

All these build up to the actual event of Jesus' baptism, which he chose to signify his calling to establish a new people, which was confirmed by the heavenly voice saying "This is my beloved son, listen to him," and which followed the biblical pattern of receiving the spirit in his work.

Thus in each of these ways we are guided to confirm, and reaffirm, and to expand our grasp of what we aim to be and do as members of Jesus' world-wide and permanently purposeful and real fellowship.

As we've often reminded ourselves, our worship, and our meditation and personal prayer, are all shaped like lessons, calisthentics, repetitive, habit-supporting life lessons we can refer to all through life to expand and get better at our purpose as God's good creations.

So, before we enter this renewal of baptismal vows, let's reflect for a moment what today's world, and specifically our nation, and our role as church members, call us to give particular attention to.

I'd say our immediate circumstances are plenty for the time we have to reflect, wouldn't you? How can we possibly follow a President who talks and aims and assumes like he does as a leader of a democracy? Then what can we do to support those who ask and act that question in organized ways? We don't want just to end up in a political brawl, or do more damage than we've already seen and participated in. We want to pray well and openly for guidance, and to build on the strengths that our religion and our political history provide for resisting more destruction and reuniting in activities, and law-making and law-abiding, and courage and charity that we all have a history in abiding by.

What else? Time's short. This pledge we're about to renew is valuable and we don't want to take away from its serious and helpful positions and expressions.

I have one suggestion that's fresh, before I stop. I've told you about the book I've just finished reading for the retired clergy group I belong to. Its principle suggestion is for the church to use its literal cityfied, urban nature to reach out towards improving understanding across all boundaries. How about using this spring as a time to make some connection with Latinos, and Lumbi Indians, and the blind, and the deaf, and other folks like us but different. See what we can do to relate and create fresh ways to hope and pray and build righteousness in our time?

Let us pray: Lord, thanks for this fresh chance to grow in your presence. Help us hear what scripture and the voice of our own prayers and the answers you constantly send us when we honestly ask for help, and lift our hearts to put your hints to work.

Thanks for making us your people. In Jesus' name we pray it, Amen.