

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: The Babies' Ministry
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Matthew 3:13-17

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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 the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

We're going to end today's church service the way Jesus began his public ministry. Do you remember the old George Clooney movie, "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" Long before Clooney became famous for marrying Amal in Venice, he made that very funny, very fun, and quite profound movie about three escaped convicts—men on the run, afoul of the law, criminals, desperados, bad guys. So in the middle of the film, they find themselves hiding out along a river, when they hear this otherworldly, ethereal, heavenly sound: a choir singing a hauntingly lovely old Gospel hymn. A bunch of people, dressed in white, headed for the river . . . to be baptized.

The scene is so heavenly, so beautiful, and so full of hope that one of the convicts jumps into the river to be baptized. He can't help himself! The promise of baptism is that powerful.

That's how Jesus began his ministry. In our church this year, we've continued our Bible Study theme of "Biblical Literacy," getting to know the basics of the Bible, and this year, it's the New Testament. We began at the beginning: the Christmas story. The angels coming to Mary and Joseph to tell them about the miracle they'll soon have, the birth of Jesus in a stable in

Bethlehem. More angels announcing to the shepherds the birth of the Savior. The Wise Men following the star to Bethlehem. The Holy Family's escape into Egypt. Jesus at age 12, visiting the Temple in Jerusalem, talking with the great religious leaders of his day. Then, the Bible is silent for 18 years. We know nothing about Jesus until one day he shows up on the banks of the Jordan River to be baptized. Once baptized, Jesus begins the wonderful, extraordinary, miraculous journey of his life.

A few minutes ago, we baptized Julianna, and we launched her on her own wonderful, extraordinary, miraculous faith journey of her life. In fact, we've been doing a lot of baptisms lately, and we have a lot more coming.

This seems like a good time to think about baptism. What is it? Why do we do it? Is it really important? Last week, I had the funeral of Cindy (Upshaw) Downs's sister, and much of the Upshaw family was there. Many of you will remember the Upshaw kids, all tremendous athletes, including Courtney, one of the best high school basketball players to ever come out of Fairfield. Courtney is now living in Colorado with her husband. They just had their second child, and they're talking about coming back here to baptize them. Why? Why would a family fly 2,500 miles across America just to come back here to baptize their kids? What's the big deal? Why do so many families put so much time and effort into arranging a baptism?

We began our Confirmation program a month ago, and at the very first class we explain what confirmation is all about. Simply stated, confirmation is designed to *confirm* what was started when they were baptized. Now, these 8th-graders, "confirmands," are all 14-15 years old. I begin that first class by asking, "Do you remember when you were baptized?" It always gets a laugh because almost all of them were baptized as infants or toddlers. They've seen pictures of themselves in their baptismal gowns, being held by me or Alida. They have Godparents who remind them of that day. They've heard stories. But of course they really had nothing to do with it. They had no say in it. Baptism was done *to* them, promises were made *for* them.

Confirmation comes along and says, "O.K., now you decide. You make the promises, you go on this wonderful, extraordinary, miraculous journey of faith." But again . . . why? What's the big deal? Well the idea of baptism has two roots. One, it's what Jesus did; two, it's our way to say, "Thanks" to God.

Our Scripture lesson that Will read tells us the story of Jesus's baptism. It's what he did. Emerging from a lifetime of obscurity, after 18 so-called "missing years," Jesus chooses to show up at the River Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptist.

John the Baptist was an interesting figure. He was a bit of a wild man, lived off the land out in the wilderness, never shaved or cut his hair. He lived out a life of faithful obedience to God. AND he was Jesus's cousin. This cousin John was making a name for himself, standing hip-deep in the river, shouting up at the people, demanding them to repent, to change their lives, and then inviting people to come into the river, wash their sins away, start over fresh, put the past behind them, embrace a new future pointed toward God.

One by one, man, woman, child, John would take them and pull them down into the water, laying them out flat on top of the water just long enough for them to sink a little bit, to get dunked, immersed, to have the water cascade over them from head to toe. John, the Baptizer, John, the Baptist.

Well, one day, Jesus shows up, enters the water, wants to be baptized. Poor cousin John. He's totally flummoxed. He knew full well who Jesus was. He even said once, "I'm not fit to carry his sandals!" "No," Jesus said, "let it be so now, let's do it right," let people see. So John the Baptist took Jesus in his arms, lowered him into the water, let the waters wash his sins away, give Jesus that fresh start, confirm that what his parents had done for him as an infant was now taking root in him. Now Jesus was choosing that wonderful extraordinary, miraculous life of faith.

Then John lifted Jesus up out of the water, and God took over, announcing for anyone who wanted to listen, "This is my Son, in whom I am well pleased."

The number-one reason we make a big deal out of baptism is that Jesus did it. It makes sense for us to emulate Jesus, to try to master what he did and said. After all, we call ourselves "Christians." In our church we talk all the time about being "Christlike," we take his name, his identity upon ourselves, we look to his life as a model for our own. Makes sense.

Let's face it; there are two theories about Jesus. One is he was the Son of God, the Messiah, the Savior of the World. About one-third of the world believes that. The other two-thirds agree he was a really, really, really good person. A holy person. A special person. A sacrificial, loving person. A great teacher. A master of ethics. People all over the world who don't get into theology or divinity all admire Jesus as the top of humankind, the epitome of what we can be, the best of the best. So that's Jesus, the Son of God or the best human being ever. Either way, he got baptized. If it's good enough for him, it's good enough for us.

That's why I got baptized. When I was 12, my father rented school buses for our whole church and bused us all to the First Italian Baptist Church of Brooklyn. My father wanted me to be baptized properly, fully dunked, immersed in a large tank of water for all to see. So off we went to Brooklyn. What I remember most is that when he put me under the water, he started to preach, sort of forgetting that I was down there until I pulled on his leg, and he let me up.

As a pastor, I've baptized people all over the world—in rivers, lakes and oceans—with water buffalo behind me, with snakes nipping at my toes. I've baptized 500 at one time, a person just out of jail, and an elderly man in a wheelchair by dumping buckets of water on his head. One Sunday, I baptized a baby by sprinkling, confirmed some teenagers, and baptized some adults by immersion, all in one service. Some said it was the first time it had been done, ever. Once, in Africa, several villages declared a holiday just so everyone could come to the river for a whole afternoon of baptisms.

And here, right there at the font over in the corner, we do our baptisms, Sunday after Sunday, more and more, actually, enough so that recently our denomination listed us as one of the top 100 churches in America for baptisms. And each and every one is important to us. That's at the heart of Greenfield Hill Church. We don't care how many baptisms we do or how many weddings or funerals or how many members we have or how many come to church or how many are in our youth groups. Each and every single one is important and special to us.

I said we do baptisms in part, in large part, because Jesus was baptized. But we also do it to give thanks. The Bible tells us the wonderful story of Hannah (1 Samuel 1 and 2), the dear lady who was not able to have children. Once, she was at the Temple, so sad, so upset, rocking back and forth in grief. The priest actually accused her of being drunk. When she explained her sorrow at not having a child, the priest promised her she would . . . and she did!

A year later she gave birth to Samuel, who grew up to be one of the great leaders of Israel, a priest and a prophet, serving God his whole life. But his wonderful, extraordinary, miraculous journey of faith began with a sort of Old Testament baptism. We call it "dedication." The Bible tells us that after Hannah finished nursing Samuel, she brought him back to the Temple with an abundant thanks offering of wine and flour and meat, and wonder of wonders, she gave the child to God! "I give him to the Lord," she declared, "for his whole life will be given over to God." (1 Samuel 1:28)

To summarize: some churches baptize babies, and they get confirmed as teenagers. Some churches dedicate babies, and they get baptized as

teenagers. Either way, the families start off by giving thanks for the babies, and then the babies grow up to take charge of their own wonderful, extraordinary, miraculous journeys of faith.

In our church, we sort of do both. For us, "infant baptism" equals baptism plus dedication. We bring the family up, we give thanks, we make promises to love and laugh, to teach and guide, to cherish and share and encourage, to walk alongside each child all the way on that journey. That's a BIG promise. But we mean it. These babies, each one, all these children, we promise to keep them at the heart of Greenfield Hill Church.

To keep that promise, we really need to strengthen our ministry with kids. Greenfield Hill Church is really changing. When I came here almost 20 years ago, we had 40, 50 full-time shut-ins, people who never left their house or nursing home. Our own tiny neighborhood right up here on top of the hill had delightful elderly neighbors, well into their 80s and beyond: the Moores, the Dotys, the Denlers, Hume Cronyn and Dwight Fanton, the Cameron Clarkes, all within 500 yards of here. We had homebound people up and down Redding Road and Congress Street. We had 10 to 15 church members just at The Watermark, the former 3030 Park.

No more. Our world has changed. Our town has changed. Our church has changed. Older members are moving away. We have 10-15 shut-ins now, at the most, only five or six here in Fairfield.

Monday night we held a special joint meeting of three church boards, Member Care, Children and Youth, and our Compassion Group, to consider our ministry with babies and families. We used to pride ourselves on never letting older people slip through the cracks or be forgotten just because they can't be here. Now we need that same determination at the other end of life's spectrum. It's *not* a problem. It's a wonderful blessing.

Most of my life I've known churches that sat around talking about the "good old days": "We used to have such a big Sunday School. We had so many kids in the nursery. What wonderful youth programs we once had," they'd moan. And they'd show me old photographs of the '40s, '50s, maybe the '60s. Here, it's 2014, and we are living those "good old days" right now. Our church has changed. Our purpose hasn't. Whether with our newest baby or our oldest shut-in, we want them at the heart of our church.

Our goal is to find ways to "be present," to be in God's presence in those first months of life, in those early years of life, when it can all be so overwhelming and often out of sight.

Every birth is a moment of high drama and miracle. I mentioned recently that the last 15 babies born in our church all started out in the NICU (neonatal intensive care unit), adding even more to both the drama AND the miracle.

In some ways, their births mirror Jesus's Christmas birth. Born in uncertainty, homeless, oppression all around, hunted, a refugee those first two years, his whole beginning was drama and miracle. It was that life, his life, that compels us to celebrate baptisms today.

When we jump ahead to the conclusion of Jesus's earthly life, the last thing Jesus told us to do was to go around the world "baptizing and teaching." The last thing, his final instruction, our job description: "Baptize and teach." A few days later, our Christian faith got jumpstarted when 3,000 people in one day, *3,000 people*, decided to get baptized. Can you imagine that scene?

Which brings us to the end of this sermon, ending on little imagination. Imagine a small country church full of mostly good people. And those people want to be a little bit better. All of them, privy to their own shortcomings, their own failures, their own doubts, some might call them "sins," those little thoughts and deeds that mount up over time. We're not proud of them, we'd like to be rid of them, forget them, bury them in the past some way. We'd like to feel fresh, new, cleansed. Imagine such a people getting together just like a family, a community, a neighborhood, a church full of friends walking together toward the river to be baptized.

In the movie "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" Delmar, one of the convicts, who had robbed a Piggly Wiggly market, cannot resist the promises of baptism. He jumps into the river, goes to the head of the line, and gets himself fully immersed. When he comes back up, he runs toward his friends, filled with joy, expressing the simple Gospel truth, as he shouts to George Clooney, "Well that's it, boys. I've been redeemed. The preacher's done washed away all my sins and transgressions. It's the straight and narrow from here on out, and heaven everlasting's my reward . . . C'mon in boys, the water is fine."

Lets see if we can echo that spirit of joy by singing along with the CD of Allison Krauss's old baptism song, "Down to the River to Pray." Have some fun with it!

"Down To The River To Pray"

As I went down in the river to pray
Studying about that good ol' way
And who shall wear the starry crown?
Good Lord show me the way!

O sisters let's go down
Let's go down, come on down
O sisters let's go down
Down in the river to pray

As I went down in the river to pray
Studying about that good ol' way
And who shall wear the robe & crown?
Good Lord show me the way

O brothers let's go down
Let's go down, come on down
Come on brothers, let's go down
Down in the river to pray

As I went down in the river to pray
Studying about that good ol' way
And who shall wear the starry crown?
Good Lord show me the way

O fathers let's go down
Let's go down, come on down
O fathers let's go down
Down in the river to pray

As I went down in the river to pray
Studying about that good ol' way
And who shall wear the robe and crown?
Good Lord show me the way

O mothers let's go down
Come on down, don't you wanna go down?
Come on mothers, let's go down
Down in the river to pray

As I went down in the river to pray
Studying about that good ol' way
And who shall wear the starry crown?
Good Lord show me the way

O sinners, let's go down
Let's go down, come on down
O sinners, let's go down
Down in the river to pray

As I went down in the river to pray
Studying about that good ol' way
And who shall wear the robe and crown?
Good Lord show me the way