



# Breaking Open the Word

12<sup>th</sup> January, 2025

## New Beginning



Dennis Webster



St Peter's by the Lake  
Paynesville, Victoria Australia  
Anglican Diocese of Gippsland

## INTRODUCTION

Isaiah 43.1-7

Psalms 29

Acts 8.14-17

Luke 3.15-17, 21, 22

Book of Common Prayer (1662) Collect

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Introduction

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Reflection

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Discussion Questions

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Five Days of Meditation and Prayer

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O Lord,  
we beseech thee mercifully  
to receive the prayers of thy people  
which call upon thee:  
and grant that they may both perceive and know  
what things they ought to do,  
and also may have grace and power  
faithfully  
to fulfil the same:  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

In this sermon, Dennis reflects on the significance of Jesus' baptism while noting the absence of John the Baptist in this account.

He emphasises how baptism serves as a moment of repentance and a fresh start for individuals seeking forgiveness and purification.

Jesus' baptism is pivotal, marked by His prayer and the descent of the Holy Spirit, which heralds His divine mission to heal and transform lives. This connects to the prophecies in Isaiah, offering hope and assurance to those anxious about their circumstances.

Further elaboration explores that true prosperity and transformation are found not in material wealth

but in a deep relationship with God.

The importance of action and justice in the Christian journey, where baptism signifies a commitment to live out one's faith purposefully and in alignment with God's will.

The message culminates in the call to embrace a life that reflects God's love, promoting mercy and humility, encouraging every believer to view each day as an opportunity for renewal and a more profound connection with the Divine.

The sermon concludes with a heartfelt prayer, reminding the congregation of their mission to serve and love, rooted in the assurance of being God's beloved children.

Prayer

- Ask for prayer requests from your community.
- Pray for guidance to embrace the Spirit of God in our lives this week.
- Ask God to help us recognise opportunities for transformation in our daily actions.
- Seek strength to share love and kindness in all we do.

God of Creation, breathe into us, made of clay,  
your gift of life so that we, made in your image  
may become your eyes, ears, hands and voice.

Reflecting on our thoughts from last week about reading into the text things that are not there, it's interesting that this version of the story of the Baptism of Jesus leaves out some key elements. For instance, John the Baptist doesn't appear in this particular account. At the time, Jesus was being baptised among people eagerly anticipating the arrival of the Messiah, the Christ, who they believed would come soon. It's important to remember that Herod had already arrested John. As a result, this baptism narrative has a sense of absence, mainly because John was meant to symbolise repentance through his prayers, even if he wasn't present there with Jesus.

There was a sense of anticipation in the air. Repentance is truly a special moment for turning one's life around. For the people gathered at the Jordan River, participating in the rituals of bathing and praying for their nation's forgiveness symbolised a fresh start, but it was clear that something deeper was needed. At the core of baptism is the beautiful Jewish idea of purification. While it's meaningful to wash away the "stain of sin symbolically," the fundamental transformation comes from living a life that inspires change in ourselves and those

around us.

This is where Jesus truly shines in what happens next. After taking time for prayer following the ritual to seek guidance, the Holy Spirit gracefully descends upon him like a dove, as Luke describes, revealing his Divine Mission. Jesus is destined to make a difference through preaching, healing, and fulfilling the vital role of the Messiah.

In Isaiah 35, the prophecy of the Messianic Mission shines brightly. It offers these comforting words to those with anxious hearts: "Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come with a mighty hand. With divine love and protection, He will come to save you." Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be set free. The lame will leap like a deer, and those who could not speak will shout for joy. In the wilderness, waters will burst forth, and streams will flow in the desert.

Later this year, we'll hear John's disciples ask Jesus, "Are you the one to come, or should we wait for another?" (Luke 7:22) With a gentle assurance, Jesus replied, "Go back and share with John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf

hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor." In the synagogue in Nazareth, all eyes were on Jesus as he read the Isaiah passage that began with, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." They eagerly awaited to see what extraordinary act Jesus would perform next. "Today," He announced, "this is being fulfilled right before you."

This wasn't quite what they had hoped for or wanted to hear. Hurt by his words, they pushed him away from the synagogue and out of town, moving towards the cliffs. Struggling to see past his humble beginnings, the people found it hard to imagine a fresh start in their lives. They had been blind before and seemed to remain so. While they waited for rescue, they expected to gain from Christ without needing to change their ways as part of embracing a new beginning. They envisioned the Messiah as someone who would support their current lifestyle and superiority, liberating them from the Roman invaders and helping establish Israel as a people who strive with God.

However, this isn't quite the path God had envisioned. The Messianic mission was designed to spark change, not just for communities but for every individual as well. During Jesus' baptism, part of the journey was about opening oneself in heartfelt prayer to embrace the Spirit of God right as his ministry began. It wasn't enough to go through the

motions; true transformation was essential. In Jesus, we also hear the beautiful affirmation from the heavens: "This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Luke shares a refreshing viewpoint on the meaningful ritual of baptism for the forgiveness of sins. As we look at the waters of the Jordan River— the same river where the Israelites crossed into the Promised Land— we see it symbolises starting anew, a life of worship that delights God following their liberation from Egypt's oppression. In baptism, we connect deeply to the Exodus story of redemption and hope. This incredible narrative resonates in Jesus's journey, where, in a profound act of love, it's not the oppressors' children who die but Jesus, the first-born son. Through baptism into Jesus's death and resurrection, blessed by the Holy Spirit's empowering touch, this day of new beginnings becomes more than just a simple dip in the muddy waters of Palestine.

The new beginning isn't just about status; it's an incredible journey of redemption that invites everyone to embrace the joy and responsibility of living as God's beloved. To be baptised means to join a vibrant community of action rather than just claiming rights. The hope that once drove them to seek the Messiah now inspires a heartfelt commitment to justice and kindness on the path toward God. This journey is about commissioning, as it beautifully

washes away the old to renew oneself, empowering us to return with purpose and make a meaningful difference in the world around us.

People who are blind are given the gift of sight, and those who couldn't walk can now take joyous steps. The voices of the oppressed rise up and are finally heard, bringing hope and blessings to the poor. God's immense love for all of creation shines brightly through the living word, which is now made flesh, walking among us. Entering into a relationship with Christ leads us into a vibrant and fulfilling connection with God, which invites challenges and deep satisfaction far beyond what material wealth can offer. In the Christian view, true prosperity isn't measured in possessions but in the beautiful reflection of the Holy Spirit within us, turning every action into a moment of reverence and worship. We wholeheartedly honour the Divine image in each other and the entirety of creation.

In Jesus' teachings, spiritual prosperity blossoms from a close relationship with God. It involves aligning our lives with His will and bearing fruit that reflects His kingdom. Unlike material prosperity, which emphasises wealth and possessions, spiritual prosperity celebrates inner transformation, heartfelt obedience to God, and the promise of eternal rewards. A life centred on God, as taught by Jesus, is filled with faith, love, joy, peace, and purpose. It's about embodying God's values, actively pursuing His kingdom, and discovering fulfilment not through material things but through a deep, meaningful relationship with Him. True prosperity is eternal, shining through a life that glorifies God and brings blessings to others. Once again, the words of the prophet Micah overshadow the story of Jesus'

ministry. The promised child is now setting out on his baptismal ministry. From the very house of David, he begins the journey of the Good Shepherd, who, like his forebear David, has found favour in God's sight. Baptised into a movement that requires change, Jesus shows us what is needed. We all, baptised into Christ's death and resurrection, share the same ministry.

**7 Would the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? 8 He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6)**

Baptism, membership in the Church, being part of God's family, and inheriting the kingdom are more than rituals. They are a call to mission, action, and justice. They are to love mercy in a way that transforms relationships, fosters peace, and reflects God's heart. Walking humbly with God is a lifelong journey of surrender, trust, and growth in one's relationship with the Divine. Like all pilgrimages, it begins with a single step.

Baptised in water and anointed by the Spirit, we are all called to repent, turn away from all evil, and live our faith in all we do and say. The post-communion prayer before the blessing reminds us of our mission in life. Today's words echo those of St Teresa of Avila.

*God of each time and space,  
show yourself to me this week,  
that as I seek to follow in your way,  
you may guide my feet and lighten my heart.*

**Take our hands and work through them.**

**Take our minds and think through them.**

**Take our lips and speak through them.**

**Take our hearts and set us on fire with love for you.**

We embrace this path in peace, loving and serving the Lord with all our hearts. Every day is a chance to recreate our past experiences and to journey closer to God. With each new day, we're nourished by God's love and blessed with prosperity, which helps us move forward with joy. As treasured heirs of God's kingdom, we hold onto the beautiful hope that we are God's beloved children, and the Creator who made us looks upon us with delight.

### Discussion Questions

**1. Why do you think John the Baptist's absence in the baptism of Jesus adds to the sense of anticipation among the people?**

John's absence represents a significant moment of expectation, as the people were eagerly waiting for the Messiah.

Can you think of a time when you were waiting for something important? How did that waiting shape your feelings or actions?

**2. What does the concept of baptism symbolise in the context of new beginnings and forgiveness?**

The sermon described baptism as a ritual representing purification and a fresh start, connecting to the Jewish idea of turning one's life around.

How can you relate the idea of a fresh start to your own life? Are there areas where  
Do you feel the need for renewal or change?

**3. How did Jesus' baptism and the subsequent descent of the Holy Spirit, according to the sermon, underscore his divine mission?**

After Jesus prayed, the Holy Spirit descended on him, marking the beginning of his mission to preach and heal.

What might your mission or purpose in life be?  
How can you seek guidance to fulfil that mission?



**4. What do the prophecies in Isaiah and the actions of Jesus reveal about God's plan for change and transformation?**

The sermon referenced Isaiah's prophecies about healing and hope and how Jesus' actions aligned with those promises, emphasising the importance of transformation.

In what ways do you believe God is calling you to bring about change in your community or relationships?

**5. How can we interpret Micah's statement about acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God in light of our daily lives?**

Quoting Micah, discuss how these actions are not only expectations but essential to our faith and mission.

What practical steps can you take to live out these values in your school or community?

## Conversation Starters with younger people.

- What do you think baptism means?  
This question relates to the emphasis on the transformative journey of baptism discussed in the sermon.
- How can we show kindness and justice in our lives?  
This comes from the sermon's call for action and community involvement in living out one's faith.
- Why do you think Jesus' baptism was significant?  
This connects to the discussion on Jesus' divine mission and what His baptism symbolises for believers.
- What does it mean to have a close relationship with God?  
This is based on the sermon's teaching that true prosperity comes from life's spiritual aspects, not material ones.
- How can we make a difference in our community?  
This relates to the sermon's message about individual and collective change for the good of others.

## Walking Gently on Sacred Ground



This five-day devotional will explore the sermon from this weekend in greater depth. We will explore themes of baptism, transformation, and the call to live a life that reflects God's love and mission.

### Day 1 Luke 3:21-22

As we reflect on the baptism of Jesus, we are reminded that this moment symbolises not just the act of baptism but also the profound transformation that follows. John's absence reminds us of the need for genuine repentance and the anticipation of a new beginning. The transition from ritual to heartfelt commitment is where lasting change occurs. When we are baptised, we don't just go through the motions; we are embracing a life empowered by the Holy Spirit, ready to inspire change within ourselves and those around us. This message calls to open our hearts in prayer and reflection, seeking God's guidance as we embark on this transformative journey.

Are we ready to be washed anew and commit ourselves to His mission? Just as Jesus emerged from the waters, we, too, are invited to rise with renewed purpose and embrace the path God has set for us.

- What does baptism mean to you personally?
- How can you align your life more closely with God's mission?
- Are there areas in your life where you must seek genuine repentance?
- Pray for a renewed spirit and a heart open to God's transforming work.
- Reflect on how you can actively participate in God's mission this week.

### Day 2 Isaiah 35:4-6

The prophecy in Isaiah reassures the anxious hearts with a message of hope and redemption. As we explore the promise that God will come with a mighty hand, we are reminded of His power to bring healing and restoration. Jesus' ministry fulfils this prophecy, as He opens the eyes of the blind and brings joy and freedom to the oppressed. This is not just a historical account; it resonates deeply with our lives today. We encounter despair, yet God's promise stands firm, inviting us to trust

His ability to transform our circumstances. As we reflect on our lives, we must ask ourselves: Are we willing to give others this message of hope? Are our hearts open to the work that God is doing in and through us?

This journey invites us to actively participate in restoring those around us, embodying Christ's light and love in a world that desperately needs it.

How has God transformed your life in the past?

Who in your life needs the hope that God offers?

What steps can you take to share God's love with others this week?

Consider praying for those who are struggling so that they may find hope in God.

Reflect on how God is calling you to be a source of encouragement to others.

### Day 3 Luke 7:22

When John's disciples asked Jesus about His true identity, they sought reassurance that He was the Messiah they had long awaited. Jesus' response was profound: He instructed them to share the evidence of His work with John. This affirmed His mission and challenged their expectations and assumptions about the Messiah. In Jesus, we see a reflection of God's heart, emphasising action over mere belief. In our faith journey, we, too, must grapple with understanding who Jesus is and what He calls us to be.

Are we looking for a convenient saviour, or are we ready to embrace the full significance of His mission? This day, let us reflect on our own lives and how God calls us to share the good news, just as Jesus did with John's disciples.

How do you perceive Jesus' role in your life?

What evidence do you see of His work in your life and community?

Are there areas where you are hesitant to embrace Jesus' calling?

Pray for clarity and boldness in sharing your faith with others.

Reflect on how God has been moving in your life and those around you.

### Day 4 Luke 4:18-19

Jesus' declaration in the synagogue about announcing good news and freedom is a powerful reminder of the transformative impact of His

ministry. Here, we learn His purpose is personal salvation and a communal call to justice and care for the marginalised. Each of us is invited to be agents of change, living out the values of God's kingdom through acts of love, mercy, and justice. The challenge lies in our willingness to engage with the world around us and respond to the cries for help that echo in our communities.

As we immerse ourselves in this teaching, may we be hearers of His word and doers. This calling requires us to embody God's heart in our interactions, extending love and grace to those who feel invisible or forgotten. It begins with an open heart and a willingness to serve.

In what areas of your life can you practice justice and mercy?

How can you actively listen to the needs of those around you?

What steps can you take to respond to injustices in your community?

Pray for openness to serve and the courage to stand for justice.

Reflect on how God's love compels you to act daily.

### Day 5 Micah 6:8

The words of Micah remind us that God requires not merely rituals but authentic living that reflects justice, love, and humility. Baptism signifies our entrance into an active faith that sees beyond ourselves and seeks to reflect God's heart in our choices and actions. As Jesus embarked on His ministry, we are called to join Him in this mission, embracing a life of purpose and affecting change in the world around us. Let us be inspired to walk humbly with God and live out our faith in all we do. The joy and responsibility of being a part of God's family compel us to serve and love others with abandon.

Our faith journey is not just about what we receive but what we give as we fulfil our calling to be agents of His grace in a world that desperately needs it.

What does it mean for you to act justly and love mercy?

How can humility shape your interactions with others?

-What commitments can you make to live out your faith actively?

Pray for the strength to embody God's justice and mercy daily.

Reflect on how God calls you to take a step of faith this week.

# End notes and further reading

Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Luke (St Paul's Press)  
The Gospel of Matthew

Tannehill, Robert C, **Narrative Unity Luke Acts Vol: A Literary Interpretation: Volume One: The Gospel According to Luke:**, Augsburg Fortress Publishers 1991

The Worship Cloud: articles by N.T. Wright and Jane Williams  
The Vine Newsletter SPCK

Andrew's Version: <https://substack.com/@abmcg>

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