Here we are – back at the River Jordan: that boundary between Wilderness and the Holy Lands. How many times have we been here before? +++ All the way back in Genesis, it was at the Jordan where Abram and Lot each went their own way – Lot traveling east to settle on the plains, where he would be wrapped up in the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah – Abram settling to the west, in Canaan, a land soon promised to him and his descendants by the Lord – a land later called Israel. +++ It was the River Jordan that Jacob had to cross on his way home – just after wrestling all night with the angel, who blessed him and renamed him “Israel.” +++ Before his death, Moses led the Israelites through the wilderness for 40 years after their escape from Egypt – he led them to the banks of the Jordan, where Joshua became their new leader and took them across the water to make their new home. As they crossed, the waters of the Jordan parted to welcome them to the Promised Land – just as the Red Sea had parted to save them as they began their journey. +++ Generations later, the river’s waters parted again, for the great prophet Elijah and his protégé Elisha – just before a chariot of fire and horses appeared to carry Elijah to heaven. +++ +++ Time and again, the River Jordan has been at the center of important transitions for God’s People – at the ends and beginnings of eras – when things would never be the same again; +++ transitions marked by the guiding presence of the Lord. The River Jordan has been a place of God’s deliverance… a place where God’s promises have been fulfilled. +++ +++ +++ And now… it’s John the Baptist… – crying out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord. Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Matthew tells us “the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him.” Lots of people are drawn to this new message, coming to repent of their sins, and to be baptized by John in the waters of the Jordan… – preparing for the one who is coming – the one who will baptize “with the Holy Spirit and fire.” +++ And then,… Jesus is… there – at the Jordan – to be baptized by John – just like everybody else. He doesn’t make a grand entrance. He doesn’t float in on a cloud or zap in on a bolt of lightning… He just… comes… Jesus just hikes over from the nearest road – sweating and dusty like everybody else – and wants to be baptized.

You know, I can really visualize that moment. John in his camelhair clothing with a big leather belt holding it all together – a rugged outdoorsy man with water dripping from his beard. Can you see him, standing in the water probably up to his thighs, the moment he looks up and beholds the man who has joined him in the river? He knew who Jesus was the moment he saw him… +++ +++ Can you hear the sound of the water rushing past – the hot sun bearing down – maybe a bee or two buzzing around, interested in a bit of wild honey stuck in John’s beard? +++ Two men – both expected, at least since the time of Isaiah:: the suffering savior and the voice in the wilderness – standing in the river – face to face. +++ Finally, John breaks the silence: “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” +++ And Jesus responds, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” … +++ Those are Jesus’ first words in the Gospel, humbly insisting that John do the baptizing despite his own great power – “to fulfill all righteousness.” +++ Now remember, John baptizes people who are repenting of their sins. But Jesus is without sin – he has nothing to repent of and needs no forgiveness. +++ So,… the first thing he does in the entire Gospel is to be cleansed of sins he never committed… he declares his solidarity with sinners like us, willingly joining us in the Jordan and taking on our penance as his own. +++ +++ You know, from the opening verse, literally chapter 1, verse 1, Matthew has been clear that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Yet this Messiah – who we are about to learn is the Son of God – never strays far from this moment… when he stands with us in the waters of baptism to be cleansed of sins that are not his own – to fulfill all righteousness – righteousness that will eventually lead to the cross. +++ +++ Now… +++ back to the River,… the rushing water,… the sun,… the bees… Standing there, facing Jesus in the water, John finally agrees to baptize him.

Remember what I said a few minutes ago about the River Jordan, how it had long been at the center of important moments and transitions for God’s People – at ends and beginnings of eras – when things would never be the same again; +++ transitions marked by the guiding presence of the Lord. The River Jordan has been a place of God’s deliverance… a place where God’s promises have been fulfilled. +++ This had never been more true than today – when, as John declares, “the kingdom of heaven has come near.” A new age dawns for us as Jesus Christ, the Son of God, steps into the River Jordan for baptism. +++ He doesn’t set himself apart from us. He doesn’t insist on some kind of holy water fit only for the Messiah… No,… Christ joins us in the river, in COMMON WATER as one of us. Through the COMMON WATER he shares with us, the Son of God creates a space of COMMON GROUND, where he will live with us – and die for us. Christ joins us in the water – and it’s his righteous presence in the water that washes us clean through our own baptism.
That’s what Jesus is talking about when he insists that John baptize him to “fulfill all righteousness.” What does he really mean by that – “to fulfill all righteousness?” In the Old Testament, “righteousness” meant obeying God simply by following the Law. But throughout Matthew, Jesus stakes out a much higher standard of righteousness for the new age – for the arrival of the kingdom of God. Jesus teaches that righteousness is a consequence of love and selflessness – and he sets the standard by giving himself to us. Just two chapters after this, he spells it out in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus offers blessings to the poor in spirit, … the meek, … and the merciful. Later, when someone asks him what the greatest commandment is, he answers that it is to love God and love our neighbors. Jesus teaches us to turn the other cheek and to refrain from judging one another. This is all new – it’s a challenge to traditional Jewish notions of righteousness. It’s empowering: followers of Christ are called to righteousness arising from their own love – their own selflessness – in his name. And Jesus leads by example – living into this new, higher righteousness by humbly submitting to John’s baptism and it is reflected later in his humbly submitting to the cross.

Yes, Matthew begins with the fact that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. As wonderful as that is, it’s what the prophecies had predicted – it’s what the Jews had been waiting for. But, in this short passage – after he shares the Common Waters of baptism with us, we find out something new about Jesus. He is not just the son of David and Abraham – He is the Son of God – and we don’t hear that from the voice of the narrator – or from John – or the Wise Men – or even an angel. We get it directly from God the Father, saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” And not only that, not only does the voice of the God come down from heaven, the Spirit of God also hovers over the waters at Jesus’ baptism in the form of a dove, echoing the Spirit sweeping over the face of the waters at Creation. At his baptism, we see that in Jesus there is a NEW CREATION. And once again – the Creator Father God declares that it is GOOD: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”….. The entire TRINITY shows up for Christ’s consecration…. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are united – once again – at the New Creation, as they had been at the Original Creation – renewing the world through water – offering peace – offering forgiveness. … Truly something new happened that day at the waters of the River Jordan – a new age was born – the kingdom of God had arrived. And, the selfless, loving, righteousness of the Son of God is extended to us through the power of his grace in our Common Waters of baptism. When we follow him – when we model ourselves after him – our own righteousness is born through his grace as well. In our own baptism, our redemption is sealed by the selfless gesture of Jesus’ baptism – extended to us.

As we remember Christ’s baptism, let’s review the three questions we responded to (or our parents responded for us if we were infants) the three questions at our own baptism… I’ll give you a moment to reflect on each one – and to answer it again in your heart: The 1st baptism question: Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world? Number 2: Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love? And Number 3: Will you be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love? What was Christ preparing you for that day – when you received the Common Water? Are you on the path he laid for you? Are you living into his kind of righteousness, arising from love and selflessness? Do you believe that it’s never too late to look for his guidance?

The Good News is that when Christ claims us and seals us as his own in baptism, he does so as the Servant Son of God – wading into that Common Water – to lay Common Ground with us – baptized himself in sinless solidarity with our sin – to extend extravagant grace and forgiveness beyond our comprehension – to wield for us the omnipotent and loving power of God which changed everything for us forever… there… in the waters… of the mighty River Jordan.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.