

“We Are One in Christ/Better Together”

Sunday January 11, 2026

Baptism of Our Lord

Rev. Ursula E. Schreffler

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord, Jesus Christ! Amen. This past weekend, I had the privilege of attending Winterfest with five of Zion’s youth, girls ages 15 to 20, and youth advisor Shayne Youchiuk. We spent Friday evening through Sunday at the Wyndham Hotel in Lancaster, across from Dutch Wonderland. This year’s theme was “Better Together” and the weekend was a wonderful opportunity to explore what it means to be in a loving community with one another, just as we are one in the Body of Christ. We spent time together in small groups with people we did not know and we called it “family time” when we met with our own youth groups. We worshiped with over 200 people and we held three large-group Bible studies. We ate all of our meals together and we had free time with old friends and new friends, and I even made a new friend or two. Our culminating group activity was a service project, for which we packed the equivalent of 30,000 rice-based meals that will be distributed in our country and abroad, wherever there is a need.

Our theme of “Better Together” is a perfect segue into today’s lessons. When Jesus is baptized, he is given God’s Holy Spirit, and sent into the world to fulfill God’s mission. That same Holy Spirit will be given to the disciples at Pentecost, and then the work of the Christian community will begin. The work that we do today on behalf of our Lord, in community, is holy indeed. We are better together because we embody the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our mission.

Baptism of Our Lord Sunday teaches us that it is through baptism that we are united as one. In the Letter to the Romans, Paul tells us that *“we, who are many, are one body in Christ...”* (Romans 12:5) In 1 Corinthians (v.13), he writes that *For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...* You know these verses and you know that the New Testament is a witness to our work as the Body of Christ. It does not matter which country we hail from or which language we speak. We Christians are united in the mission of Jesus Christ on earth, and that is to spread the good news of God’s love for all of humanity.

I would like to tell you a little story of a moment when this reality of the Body of Christ hit home for me. It was in 2019. I was on a trip with United Lutheran Seminary, led by the Rev. Dr. Mark Vitalis-Hoffman, who wrote the commentary for the Gospel of Mark in our Lutheran Study Bible. We traveled to Israel, Palestine and Jordan on this trip. Now, there are two places in Israel and one in Jordan that claim to be *the actual spot* where Jesus was baptized, but I think we can take that idea with a grain of salt. One day we stood in a place where we imagined that Jesus also stood and we mixed and mingled with pilgrims from all over the world.

The Jordan River is the natural boundary between the countries of Israel and Jordan, and we visited the baptismal site in Jordan. That place is known as “Bethany Beyond the Jordan,” and gets its name from the Gospel of John, chapter 1 verse 28. The day we visited was warm and sunny, but the experience was both humbling and sobering. Standing with us on the raised platform over the water was a Jordanian soldier carrying a machine gun. It was a not-so-subtle reminder of the ongoing conflict in the Middle East. As we stood on the platform, we could look a few hundred feet to the west and see pilgrims being baptized in the water on the Israeli side. This spot on the Jordan where we were is the international border, but it is not a border crossing

checkpoint, so we were being watched closely. We would not have been allowed to cross the water to get to the other side.

At the site, we gathered around a large stone baptismal font. Our tour guide for the day, who is a Deacon from the Lutheran Church of Bethany Beyond the Jordan, held a brief worship service with us. Now, truth be told, the body of water called the Jordan River is not much larger than a small creek. It has been dammed up to give pilgrims a place to commemorate Jesus' baptism. So we renewed our baptismal vows and anointed each other with water from the baptismal font. We then sang a camp song, one that you probably have heard, "We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord...and they'll know we are Christians by our love..."

While we were singing, a Chinese woman nudged her way into our group, looked over my shoulder at the words, and started singing along with us. When we were done, she turned to us and in her broken English said, "We are one in Christ." Her statement said it all. Truly, we are better together, and together we can spread God's love to the world. It does not matter what denomination we belong to, what language we speak, what color skin we have; we are all one in Christ and we are all children of God. Because Jesus was baptized and we were baptized by the same Holy Spirit, we share in the same mission from God.

Our good news today is that we are all one in Christ. We share one Lord, we share one baptism, and we share one God. We work together to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Is it a perfect system? Of course not. Whenever humans are involved in any venture, perfection does not happen. But we work together for the purpose that Isaiah mentions at least three times in our first lesson: we work for justice. In God's justice, the poor and the meek are lifted up, the outcast are welcomed to the table, and there is enough abundance for all. We bring a light to the nations, we open the eyes that are blind; we bring out the prisoners from the darkness. That is why we do things like prison ministry. That is why we have feeding programs. That is why we fight for migrants and refugees who have escaped disaster and war.

As we look ahead to the winter months, I invite you to ask yourself why it is that you come to church. What touches your heart during worship? Who needs your good works? Martin Luther said famously that God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does. Does that describe your understanding of service? What can you do to help bring about the Kingdom of Heaven on earth? How can we as a church better serve our community? What inspires you to serve in community? Are we "better together?" I'd love to hear your thoughts. **Amen**