

---

## *We All Need Helpers*

[Listen to the podcast.](#)

**A sermon by the Rev. Bill Harkins**  
**Epiphany 1A**  
**Baptism of Christ**

***In the Name of the God of Creation who loves us all, Amen.*** Good morning, friends, and welcome to the Cathedral on this glorious Baptismal morning in Epiphany. I am glad you are here, and grateful to those of you who have come to join with your families and friends on this occasion. Today is one of the feast days of the church, the Baptism of Christ by John the Baptist, and it is fitting that we celebrate this during Epiphany, which means, after all, something made *manifest*. And, during Epiphany the lectionary focuses on times when Jesus and the true nature of his ministry are revealed to our world. Today's Gospel is one of those.

And sometimes we need community to help us discover, who, and whose we are, and, perhaps, who we are not. Both roles are equally valuable. "Remember who you are," we parents sometimes say to our children. "Make good choices." *Esse Quam Videri*, a former coach of mine was fond of saying. It means "*Be as you seem to be ... be as you appear.*" Don't be a phony. Be a person of integrity. That is precisely why many of you are gathered here, today, in this sacred space and time, bearing these children to the waters of their Baptism and seeking to help them grow into their true selves. John the Baptist was clear about who he was, and who he was not. And because of this, he was able to help Jesus confirm his mission. Jesus consented to his Baptism in the Jordan because it named who he had been, who he was, and who he would be.

Yes, we need persons in our lives that can help us do the same. There are many *helpers* with us this morning, to help us baptize the newest Christians in the whole wide world, helpers in the form of parents, grandparents, Godparents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, and all of us, who in a few minutes will promise to be helpers too. I've spent the last 15 years of my academic career teaching in a Presbyterian seminary, and recently, I thought about something a beloved Presbyterian minister named Mr. Rogers once said: "*When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping. , To this day I remember my mother's words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers - so many caring people in this world.'*" Think for a moment about the helpers in your life. Some of them, perhaps, helped you see who you were not, and some helped you discover who you were, and become the person you are today.

In anticipation of being here with you this morning, I thought about two such relationships in my life. The first was a man named Gene, and he was my supervisor over 4 summers at Atlantic Steel Company. Now for many of you, Atlantic Steel is known only by the name of what took its place, Atlantic Station. But, on a chilly Thanksgiving morning just past, as we half-marathon runners made our way through the high rise office buildings and condos of Atlantic Station, I recalled working on the welding crew at the Atlantic Steel Company, during summers through college. *My job* was as a welder's assistant. I was very good at this. It was not complicated. It was the actual welding that gave me trouble. And let me tell you, being a good welder is tough. One hot summer day, my supervisor Gene raised the lid on his welder's helmet, paused, and said, "*William, you are not a very good welder.*" "No sir Mr. Rainey. I am not," I replied. "*But you could be,*" he said. "I see you reading all these books during lunch. Why? Do you know where all this book learning is getting you?" I had no

good answer. "No sir," I said. "No, Mr. Rainey, I do not." "Well, then why not stay here at the end of the summer? You can apprentice to me, and in 18 months you'll become a certified welder." He told me how much I'd be making. It sounded pretty good to me at the time. I was driving a '69 GTO with a 389 four-barrel carburetor that drank a lot of gas, and I had a home-town girlfriend who was a dancer with the Atlanta Ballet, and who was becoming impatient with my being at a college 7 hours away. And, Gene was right. I had no idea where all that book learning was headed. A few weeks later Mr. Rainey allowed me to weld an industrial fan to one of the steel pilings holding up Warehouse #13 for those of you who are younger—it's about where the Circ de Soliel is each year. The initial weld didn't take, and Mr. Rainey, spotting the flaw, likely saved us all, and the fan, from disaster. In September I was gratefully back at school, more confused than ever. But I was also more curious about college, and perhaps more ready to dive into the waters I had chosen, even if I did not know where they would take me. By being a helper, and challenging me, he caused me to think about who I was, and perhaps, who I was not.

Some of you have heard me talk about my maternal grandparents, who had a lovely small farm in north Georgia. It had fields, a small lake, woods, and beautiful streams. I loved it there, and would often visit them when I wanted to get away from the city. When I was there I was blessed with unconditional love and hospitality that perhaps only grandparents can give. The most significant example of this was my grandmother's pound cake, which she would bake often, and when I would come back from walking in the woods, fishing, or napping in the hammock, she would have a piece of her pound-cake and a cold glass of milk waiting for me on the dining room table. It was her way of saying, as she often did, "*Sweetheart, we are so glad you are here. We love you. This is your home, too.*"

The last time I saw her, my wife and I were visiting with our two young sons. We were in graduate school in Nashville at the time, and I treasured our visits, and delighted in introducing my sons to the farm. My grandmother called me into the kitchen, and told me to get a piece of paper and a pencil and write down the recipe for pound-cake as I helped her make one or two to take back to Tennessee. I thought this strange, because she knew the recipe by heart and she did not need to write it down. But I did as I was told, and together we made the last pound cake she ever gave me. A few weeks later she was gone. After her funeral, I drove to the farm, alone, and sat on the front porch. I could not imagine a world without her in it, and I missed her terribly. After a while I got up, and went into the dining room, and looked at the empty table where no pound cake and no glass of milk were to be found. I felt the tears in my eyes and the lump in my throat and the pain in my chest, in my spirit. And suddenly, I remembered our last time together. I remembered her abiding love for me made manifest, if you will, in her act of compassion, love, and self-giving. Did she know she did not have much longer to live? I do not know. And, I don't think it really matters. What does matter is that she was sharing in *outward and visible ways* a symbol of her love for me—as if to say "Now you know how to make this pound cake too, and you can share it with others any time you like." Sounds a bit like the Eucharist, doesn't it? Of course, it wasn't really about the pound cake at all, but about the love, hospitality, and bonds of affection we shared. Just as we do here. Now it was being passed on to me, to go and do likewise. There, in the midst of my grief, I saw all of this because it had been demonstrated to me in countless ways. I knew I had been her grandson, in whom she delighted, and now, in my moment of sorrow, that was enough. ... "*Look for the helpers,*" Mr. Rogers told parents, when asked what to say to children during hard times. "*Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.*" My grandmother, who told me who I was, and who I could become, was a helper during what were in some ways difficult years in my family. And my boss, Mr. Rainey, at Atlantic Steel, was a helper too. He believed in me, and though my vision ultimately was not the one he had for me, it helped me be clear about who I was becoming, and to define who I was not.

On the day Jesus entered the Jordan, and was baptized by his helper John the Baptist, our understanding of water changed, and it will never be the same for us Christians again. When a Christian is washed with the waters of baptism, that person is marked as Christ's own forever. In baptism, we are called to live with integrity, in community, and in relationship to the Body of Christ that continues to unfold and change, just as we do, as we seek to live with a sense of *joy and wonder, respect for the dignity of every human being, an inquiring and discerning heart, and the courage to will and to persevere*, delighting in God's creation, and in responsibility for these dear souls whom we baptize today. Jesus changed the waters, and the waters change us. And Matthew tells us that something else happened at the Jordan. The waters changed Jesus. He was changed by John's washing him in Baptism, and forever more, we worship a baptized God. God intimately knows the trials involved in being a humble servant working for a kingdom that has yet to be fully realized. But, perhaps more important, Jesus in the Jordan demonstrates that Christ will never ask us to go somewhere that he is not, even if we are not sure where we are going, and even if we are grieving the loss of one who guided us. Knowing that God has been washed by the waters of baptism reminds us that we're not alone. We have a helper in Jesus Christ. When you see someone rise dripping from

the waters of baptism dear ones, remember your baptism, and carry out with all energy the mission to which you have been called. Be a helper to one of these gathered here today, and elsewhere. Remember the baptism of Jesus and give thanks to our river-washed God who stands by us, no matter what. When we are baptized, dear friends, we are baptized into Christ's baptism too. And the unity we have with him blesses us with the very same Spirit he received. What is more, we are baptized into community—the very community of faith with which we gather this day—and within which we are all God's beloved adopted children, in Christ. *"The real issue in life,"* Mr. Rogers said, "is not how many blessings we have, but what we do with our blessings. Some people have many blessings and hoard them. Some have few and give everything away." The Spirit, ever playful and in ongoing relationship and conversation with us all, continues to reveal all the ways we can live into our Baptismal vows, one Epiphany, *one helper*, one drop of Holy water, at a time. Amen.