

"Zausted"

Sermon preached at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

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The Rev. Dr. Nina R. Pooley

Last weekend, Ken and I attended a dinner gathering for local clergy families, hosted by our area Dean, the Rev. Michael Tuck. As things were winding down one of the kids, heavily prompted by her parents, approached Michael to thank him. She said, "Thanks, but we gotta go, I'm zausted."

We all had a good laugh, but she nailed it, as a group, as a people, we are "zausted." Friends, it's the second week of January - "zausted" as our emotional state doesn't bode well as we contend with the reality of our new year.

So maybe this is the perfect time to stand on the banks of the river Jordan - and witness this incredible moment when John baptizes Jesus. Even though John protests, Jesus insists that John do the honors. Even though Jesus is the son of God, he chooses to be baptized like everyone else. He chooses this rite of baptism meant for repentance, confession, and renewal of life.

Jesus chooses to step into the water to be baptized, to have the water cascade down his face, to feel himself drenched - an act of humility and solidarity with us, and all of humanity. Embodying the ways of God - which are to come along side us, to be with us in love.

Even though we are "zausted" this morning's text invites us to run our hands through the water, to feel the pebbly shore beneath our feet, to breathe deeply of God's presence in our lives, God alongside us in love.

A story of sorts. When I went on retreat this past fall, one of the main draws for me was the retreat location at the beach in Connecticut. I needed to walk along the sand and the rocks, to look out to the horizon, to reconnect with the ocean. My fellow retreat participants thought I was a little nuts, because I walked out into the water up to my knees. October in Connecticut isn't really the kind of beach that invites that - but I needed it. There's something about water, for me, particularly about the ocean and the vast sky over it, that calms my soul and fills me up. So, I'm not surprised that Jesus wants to get into the water, or that it's there, just as he emerges soaking wet, that he hears the voice of God proclaiming, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Toward the end of the retreat, participants were invited to go out and find an object to bring to the altar for our final Eucharist. I went out into the water with a dixie cup, and collected a little bit of ocean as my offering: some sand, some water, a piece of seaweed, tiny rocks and shells. People giggled a little when I placed the cup on the altar, but when I explained the sense of peace that reconnecting with the ocean brings me, I saw a lot of smiling nods. The chef at the retreat center gave me a Tupperware container so I could bring my little ocean home with me. And I added it to my home altar. Lately, I find I need the peace and the joy it brings me, a connection with God, in tangible ways.

Brother Lain Wilson, of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, writes this about assurance:

In our own time, we face uncertainty and fear and suffering from so many directions. Our assurance that God is present with us gives us the strength and courage to endure, and gives us the strength to be present to others.<sup>1</sup>

That assurance is embodied in our text this morning, as Jesus steps into the water, choosing to stand alongside us. When we choose to follow the ways of Jesus, we're following his path of humility and solidarity, his truthfulness and grace; the way of love with which God is "well pleased." The way of companionship. The way of accompaniment. In a word, the way of "with": God with us, and us with God and neighbor.<sup>2</sup>

Admittedly, following the way of Jesus in the midst of our insane current reality is challenging. But we know the path: we embrace God's presence with us, and we model that presence and love to and for others. Though that's easier said than done when we are "zausted".

Earlier this week, the Rev. Jenny Smith posted a piece entitled, "Tending your inner life is resistance."<sup>3</sup> She included this poem.

She writes:

how do we survive  
a fascist regime?

fascism thrives on  
exhaustion and despair

tending your inner life  
is resistance  
move your body  
meditate or pray  
journal and process  
get outside

seek out reliable news  
consume truth intentionally

preserve joy and art  
sing and write  
dance and share beauty

dictators want to erase culture  
keeping our stories alive is defiance

help vulnerable people  
navigate systems

practice everyday solidarity  
refuse to go along with cruelty  
don't normalize hate speech

document injustice  
carefully and securely

subvert propaganda  
share stories  
pass on banned books  
use humor  
preserve memory

together is always  
the way forward

Friends, we begin by tending our inner life, by recognizing that we are God's children, the beloved, in whom God delights, and is well pleased. Even though we are facing a very challenging time. Because we're facing a challenging time. And maybe we draw a little more wisdom from this morning's Gospel and turn to water.

Because there's something about water - the water of our baptism, the water in our very cells, the water of the streams that cascade down the rocks in the forests of the Berkshires, the water beneath the ice of our lakes.

In this crazy, disturbing time in our nation and our experience - what if we intentionally turned to the water around us, letting it remind us of God's proclamation to us? 'You are my child, the beloved, in whom my soul delights; with you I am well pleased.'<sup>4</sup> God is with us, alongside us, and God loves us. And strengthened by that assurance, we can turn to our world with love, and be present with others.

Beloved of God, in the days ahead, may we tend to our inner selves, fortify our souls, and, remembering that we are God's children, be strengthened by God's love and presence. May we find ways to reconnect with our baptismal identity - drenched in God's love, may we walk in the ways of Jesus, loving others as we are loved, in humility and solidarity, leaving wet footprints on the shore. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Brother Lain Wilson, "Assurance," Brother Give Us a Word, SSJE, posted Jan 8, 2026

<sup>2</sup> "The Way of With: SALT's Commentary on Jesus' Baptism," Saltproject.org posted on Jan 5, 2026.

<sup>3</sup> Jenny Smith, "How do we survive a fascist regime?" *Tending your inner life is resistance*, posted on Jan 8, 2026 on The Thread by Jenny Smith.

<sup>4</sup> "The Way of With: SALT's Commentary on Jesus' Baptism," Saltproject.org posted on Jan 5, 2026.