

Central Lutheran Church
Will You Be a Witness?
January 11, 2026
Acts 10:34-43 and Matthew 3:13-17

Siblings in Christ, much has happened since I was last here with you some six weeks ago for the first Sunday of Advent.

A quick review of news stories over that time period shows much has unfolded and yet much remains unresolved. Most recently, in just the first few days of 2026, headlines focused on Venezuela and Nicolás Maduro before transitioning to ICE and Renee Nicole Good.

Church life has been a little more predictable yet also notably atypical. Central has joined other Christians traveling through Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. You, however, have taken that journey while in a larger and longer season of transition.

This morning, we started at the font. Today we celebrate the baptism of our Lord. Before I explore baptism, let me back up.

Last Sunday we celebrated the second Sunday of Christmas. Epiphany arrived a couple of days later.

For the last several years I've adopted the spiritual practice of star words. Just as the magi were guided by a star to find toddler Jesus, so also modern-day folks can be guided by a star. Rather than being up in the sky these stars can be held in our hands.

Each person chooses one star that contains their star word for the year. That word lights our path and guides us as we journey further and further into 2026.

After giving out star words at White Rock Center of Hope and to my weekly bible study group, I shared my star word on social media. I concluded my Facebook post by inviting others to share their star words.

The first person to respond had chosen the word "witness."

Witness is a theologically rich word. It is also a word that popped off the page when I first read today's passage from the tenth chapter of Acts. In this brief sermon, Peter remarks that "we are witnesses to all that Jesus said and did."¹

Let me provide some context. Before Peter begins to preach, God is already at work. Cornelius, a Gentile, receives a vision, and Peter sees one that challenges everything he knows about who belongs. Guided by the Spirit, Peter enters Cornelius's home and realizes this moment is more about people than it is about rules. His sermon begins with a simple yet powerful truth: God shows no partiality. Or, put more directly: God doesn't play favorites.

Scholars tell us that this sermon is every bit as groundbreaking as it appears. It is the first recorded sermon preached to a Gentile audience in Acts and it contains the "most detailed account of Jesus earthly life" in the entire book.² Peter's message effectively summarizes all of Luke's Gospel.

We rightly think of this sermon as a follow up to the one he preached back in Acts 2, which includes the verses we hear read each year at Pentecost – sometimes in many languages.

Back in Acts 2, Peter preaches in Jerusalem to Jews from many nations, the Holy Spirit shows up in a mighty way, and 3,000 are baptized.

Now in Acts 10, Peter preaches in Caesarea to Gentiles and, in the verses immediately following this morning's reading, the Holy Spirit shows up in a mighty way guiding Cornelius and his household to be baptized.

As we begin a new year there is no better place to start than with Peter's proclamation: "It makes no difference who you are or where you're from - if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open."³

¹ Acts 10:39

² John M. Rottman. "First Sunday after Epiphany (Baptism of the Lord), Year A" in *The Lectionary Commentary: The Second Readings: Acts and the Epistles*, ed. Roger E. Van Harn (William B. Eerdmans, 2001), p. 8.

³ Acts 10:35 (The Message)

Peter's words and the Spirit's outpouring in Caesarea remind us that God's welcome and God's work are greater than all humanly constructed boundaries. And that same Spirit, that same affirmation of God's inclusive love, is at the heart of our Gospel lesson.

When Jesus comes to John at the Jordan, he steps into the water not because he needs cleansing, but to demonstrate what it looks like to follow God wholeheartedly, stand in solidarity with humanity, and live a life of intention and service.

Every congregation has its own way of celebrating Jesus' baptism. Many liturgically oriented denominations – including the ELCA – have set aside today to do so.

In preparing to serve as your supply pastor, I learned how important this day is at Central. In conversation with some of your leaders I learned – of course only after the bulletins had been printed – that the service typically begins with baptismal remembrance.

Upon entering the sanctuary this morning – whether virtually or in person – you likely noticed something was different. The baptismal font had been moved to a central place.

Today, I invite you to remember your baptism. If you'd like to take a trip down memory lane to recall the specifics of that day – perhaps relying on stories or pictures shared with you by your parents, sponsors, or loved ones – please do. But I intend the phrase remember your baptism in its more traditional Lutheran sense: remember that in the waters of baptism you were marked as Christ's own forever – marked with the cross of Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit, a promise that nothing can undo.

When Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters at the Jordan, God's voice could be heard from the heavens naming him beloved and assuring him that God was well pleased. In that moment, the Triune God announced Jesus' identity and mission. Here, at the

very beginning of Jesus' public ministry, we glimpse the heart of our calling: to live as the beloved of God in the world.

As baptized believers, we too are God's beloved and we are invited to be witnesses to the good news of Jesus Christ. Earlier in the book of Acts, Jesus tells his followers that the Spirit will empower them to be his witnesses "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."⁴

Friends, as we enter a new year, there is no requirement that any of us make, much less faithfully keep, a resolution. Instead, as we begin anew in 2026, we are given an opportunity to remember our baptism by reaffirming our commitment to live as witnesses to the good news of Jesus Christ.

ELCA Presiding Bishop Yehiel Curry, in a statement responding to the tragic ICE shooting in Minneapolis, reminds us that "God calls us to be witnesses to God's presence, healing and hope."⁵

May we be those people today and every day.

Amen.

⁴ Acts 1:8

⁵ Yehiel Curry. "Bishop Curry Issues Statement on ICE Shooting in Minneapolis" – available at <https://www.elca.org/news-and-events/bishop-curry-issues-statement-on-ice-shooting-in-minneapolis>