

**Rev. Maeve Hammond**

**“The Baptist”**

**Isaiah 42:1-9 | Matthew 3:13-17**

**11 January 2026**

Friends, I'd like to share something a little personal, a little vulnerable, during worship today. This “something” is, well, my soul—or, rather, over twenty fragments of my soul. I'm sure you're sitting here, listening to this sermon, and thinking... *what?* How in the world can someone actually *show* their soul? What even *is* a soul? Can I show *my* soul somehow? The answers to these questions are: 1) yes, 2) thanks for asking, let's talk about it, and 3) yes.

Could we please move to the next slide? Here, you will find more than twenty collages, on 5x8 cards (roughly the size of a greeting card), that represent parts and pieces of my inner self. I've created these collages in community groups and by myself over the past three years in a practice called SoulCollage. How many of you here have heard of SoulCollage before? Please raise your hand if you're in the Sanctuary, or put a comment in our YouTube chat. Like some of you, I first learned of SoulCollage through this congregation, First Congregational Church in Winchester. Jane Ring Frank, our Minister of Worship & The Arts, is a certified SoulCollage facilitator and typically leads workshops for our Deacons, our youth, and for the broader community throughout the year. (In fact, if I'm not mistaken, Jane will be offering a workshop later this winter, which you could check out for yourself.)

SoulCollage, borrowing from the official website for the practice, “is an expressive arts practice done individually or in community. Founded by Seena B. Frost, the method develops creativity and intuition, encourages self-discovery, and provides personal guidance” (SoulCollage 2026). Frost, a trained psychotherapist with a Master of Divinity

and a background in spiritual and religious studies, developed SoulCollage in the 1980s. She had the idea of “creating collaged cards and consulting them for self-discovery in her psychotherapy groups in the late 1980s” (SoulCollage 2026). Frost published a book, and the practice then received national and global recognition. Currently, there are over 6,000 trained SoulCollage facilitators in at least 63 countries (SoulCollage 2026). She saw the soul as the fullest essence of a person—all of the parts that make us who we are and all of the beings and experiences that shape us, whether we want them or not. Collage is, as Jane calls it, “the great equalizer.” Even if you haven’t taken an art class since elementary school, even if crafts really aren’t your thing or are way outside of your comfort zone, collage is a relatively intuitive medium. There are no grades, and there are no expectations other than gluing at least one picture onto a 5x8 piece of cardstock.

How, exactly, do you engage in SoulCollage? 1) You find your images, which are typically sourced from magazines or photobooks, 2) you transform the images into a card-sized collage, 3) you “let the image speak to you through your own voice” using I-statements, and 4) you share what the card wants to say with others. Succinctly put, SoulCollage asks you to find pieces of your soul—which I define as your truest inner self when I practice SoulCollage—reflected in the color, symbolism, and movement of collage. *To find pieces of your soul—or your truest inner self—reflected in collage.* It’s a deeply spiritual and meditative experience that calls us to relinquish some of our control over perfectionism and artistic ability. For a moment, we eschew the veneer of who we could or should be, and we dive into images and what they represent to the parts we often keep hidden from the outside world—and, even, from ourselves.

As a Christian minister, I tend to understand my life and my spiritual and artistic journeys through the lens of God's love, Christ's peace, and the Holy Spirit's presence. Through the lens of my faith, SoulCollage is a radical acceptance of the parts of ourselves that God the Trinity loves and intimately knows and accepts, even if we wish They didn't. These challenging parts hold our sadness, our grief, our worries, our self-criticisms, our Otherness/outcast identities, and our hardest memories. These challenging parts are the ones that most closely align us with the people that Jesus loved in his ministry—and actively loves and supports today. Indeed, SoulCollage allows us to manifest the parts of us that we consider to be vulnerabilities and weakness, but that Christ considers to be already good and already beloved. This practice also allows us to dive into and bring forth the parts of ourselves that we value and wish we could emulate more regularly: our childlike wonder, our hope, our courage, our laughter, our silliness. All of our parts—those that are challenging and those that are more comfortable to us—are equally worthy of attention, care, and presence.

Last Wednesday, I was working from home in the evening as I prepared for today's worship service and sermon. While I was rereading the lectionary passage from the Gospel of Matthew that tells of Christ's baptism, I prayerfully and actively imagined this interaction between John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit in the Jordan River. I saw John the Baptist standing in the river beside Jesus as he cups water from this sacred and historic body of water and lets it flow from his hands upon his cousin, the Messiah. He looks sunburnt, rough-around-the-edges, and a bit strange in his garment made of camel hair and worn leather belt. Yet, he is fully present—as fully immersed in the moment as Jesus is in the water. And, then, suddenly, I feel my attention turn away

from my bible study as I glance over at the collage and crafts supplies we keep in our living room. Yes, we do keep a small mountain of collage supplies in a wicker basket underneath our coffee table in our living room because we live in a small Boston apartment, and you have to make do with the space you have in a small Boston apartment. In that moment, a sense of surety and calmness washes over me, and I just know that I need to make a SoulCollage card. It's about six o'clock at that point, and I have a Zoom meeting at seven o'clock, so I only have an hour to glue something on my card. I'm quickly going through the hundreds of images that Flo and I have sourced from secondhand magazines and photobooks to try to find the images that call to me. I come across a photo of a father holding his sick baby in a tub as he washed him. It's not at all an image that I have included in any of my SoulCollage cards before, and, truthfully, it's not a representation that I thought would have had a place in my soul, in my truest inner self. But, I hold up the image to the light, and I think to myself: *this, this image belongs to me. This baptism, as it were, means something to me.*

I won't say much more about my card. However, after my hour was up, and I had finished my card, I gave it a name: "The Baptist." If you're looking at the screen, it's on the second card on the bottom row (left to right). I've also brought my card with me to worship today, so you can take a look at it during hospitality hour. What I will say about "The Baptist," though, is how surprised I was to find myself making a card that embodies a whole lot of the spirit of John the Baptist. I learned that a part of me identified with this image of the baptist—this eccentric, stubborn hermit called John.

So, I'd like to tell you more about this John, who he was, and what he has meant to our Christian tradition. As Matthew's Gospel tells it, Jesus comes to his radical,

somewhat eccentric, cousin, John the Baptist. You may remember that John's mother, Elizabeth, became pregnant a few months before Mary, as the Gospel of Luke tells it. John is around Jesus's age. He lives alone, in a cave, in the wilderness. We've already talked about his attire: camel hair and a leather belt. He keeps a kosher diet, which is great...until you remember that he is living, again, in the wilderness. He subsists off of locusts, a type of grasshopper, and wild honey. John belonged to the Essenes, one of the three main Jewish sects in the first century CE, alongside the Saducees and Pharisees. The Essenes were the smallest sect out of the three—about six-thousand existed during John the Baptist's time. You could consider them the most subversive of the three. Whereas the Saducees and Pharisees practiced religion in public life and had varying degrees of support and tolerance of the Roman Empire, the Essenes separated themselves from the corruption of the outside world and chose instead to live in the wilderness. They practiced strict purity laws, as particularly described in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible), and believed the end times were knocking at their door. In sum, they were separatist ascetics who had very strong beliefs and practices around purity, discipline, and monastic life.

As an Essene, John the Baptist had an apocalyptic bent to his ministry. He trusted in the words of the minor prophets and believed that God's people needed to repent before the coming of God's judgment and justice. In accordance with purity laws, he instructed his followers to repent fully *before* their baptism, so as to fully receive the water's peace and presence. We learn later, after years of John's ministry, that John will meet an untimely fate—one that parallels Jesus's own. The son of Herod, whose laws forced Jesus and his family to flee their homeland, will order his capture and execution.

At first glance, John the Baptist may seem like a very odd part of my soul—kind of like a puzzle piece that you just can't quite get to match any other. Yet, spiritual experiences like this reminds me, once again, of the compelling, mysterious ways of our faith. Simply put, the Holy Spirit can, as She did after Jesus' baptism, descend upon us when we least expect it. Such as, when you're reading about John the Baptist and then suddenly have to pull yourself away from your work to get up and make a collage for an hour and learn something new about yourself and your ministry. This experience tells me that God's presence can be made manifest in creative, artistic, and spontaneous ways. Pay attention to the figures and themes that you have overlooked in Scripture. Challenge yourself, even, and intentionally call upon or read about these figures and themes into your spiritual life. What wisdom do they have in store for you? What can you learn from them? Where, with God's help, can you find a spark of connection or a reflection of yourself within their stories?

Friends, it is a joy and a blessing that we are continually surprised and delighted by our God, from whom all good things flow. May we open our hearts and let the Spirit comfort and inspire us. May we harness the playfulness, the artistry, and the creativity that God has given each and every one of us to become a fuller and more accepting version of ourselves that comes closer to the Christself within us. Amen.