

“Epiphany on the Jordan”

Matthew 3:13–17

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About twelve years ago, I went on a pilgrimage to Israel with an ecumenical group of ministers. In the two weeks we were gone, we explored both the region of Galilee and the Old City of Jerusalem — but the first half of our trip, we stayed in Tiberias, a city on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. With that as our homebase for that first week, we took day trips visiting significant sites of Jesus’ life and ministry.

One day, we traveled north from Tiberias to the base of Mount Hermon to a place called Banias, which in biblical times was called Caesarea Philippi. There we saw the origins of a river, a mere trickle that would gather volume as it flowed from that northern most part of Israel, through the Sea of Galilee, and make its final, winding stretch to the Dead Sea.

And as I sat on the bank where that trickle became a stream, it struck me that this was a river that channeled bedrock narratives of my faith... it was the river that Joshua crossed when he led the people of Israel out of the wilderness and into the Promised Land; it was the river in which Elisha instructed Naaman to wash seven times to be healed; it was the oil-painted backdrop I saw every Sunday in the sanctuary of my home church. It was the river that bore witness to Jesus’ baptism...

I remember the awe-inspired thoughts and feelings I had as I sat on the banks of the Jordan River that day, watching that flowing stream, sparkling and alive, transporting those Jordan stories in a bed worn deep with history yet all the while carving new paths of deliverance. In fact, those are some of the words I journaled that day as I sat there.

And as I prepared for today’s message, I found myself back there, sitting on that bank wondering what it might have been like to be on the more southern banks of this river when Jesus waded into the waters.

Thankfully, Matthew takes us there today.

But before he does, he makes sure to establish in that long genealogy in chapter one with all the hard-to-pronounce names — that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, the culmination of all of Israel’s hopes — that this is not a new story but a continuation of a story God has been writing from the very beginning; I think Matthew wants his Jewish audience of the day to understand that Jesus IS the “servant ...who will bring forth justice

to the nations” as we heard in our Isaiah reading earlier -- the embodiment of Israel’s true and perfect king. Case in point: just last week our scripture focused on distant Wise Men, following a star, and when they found the baby Jesus they lavished gifts upon him and worshipped him, just as they’d do for a king.

As the narrative continues, after fleeing to Egypt to escape the jealous wrath of a different kind of king, Jesus and his family ultimately settle in the Galilean village of Nazareth. And with zero insight into what Jesus might have done as a youth, Matthew fast-forwards nearly thirty years later to today’s scripture, as if cutting to the chase to reveal what *kind* of king, what kind of leader, Jesus will be.

To set the scene, Matthew tells us about John the Baptist and his preaching ministry in the wilderness of Judea. Don’t you just know the whole Judean countryside was abuzz about this wild-looking, locust-eating, prophet-quoting preacher named John who was in the wilderness calling people to repentance and baptizing them? It’s intriguing, a little peculiar—the kind of news that would travel pretty quickly, I would think. And when the word makes it to Nazareth to Jesus’ ears, what does Jesus do but to make a trek to the margins of Israel to meet this fur-clad preacher and his followers who are literally in the wilderness. Jesus goes to find them there.

I think that’s a significant clue to the kind of leader Jesus will be – not a king who will stay in his fortified palace but one who would respond, with sincere interest and care, who would put his feet on the dusty path and meet folks where they were. It makes me think of the psalmist’s words in the 23rd psalm: “Surely Goodness and Mercy will follow me...”

And what a great reminder of who Jesus is to us—not one who waits for us to find him when we have our priorities back in order, when we are on better terms with a family member, when we’ve resolved our skepticism or found answers to our questions—but one who seeks us and meets us wherever we happen to be, whatever we happen to be feeling.

And then Matthew tells us that Jesus has a verbal exchange with John—the first time we hear reference of Jesus speaking in Matthew’s gospel. He asks John to baptize him. Can you imagine how taken aback John must have been? The unworthiness that he must have felt? John was the one who needed to be baptized by Jesus, not the other way around for heaven’s sake! And John questions him about that, some translations say that John

protested, even. In John's understanding of the hierarchy of holiness here, his baptizing Jesus was completely backwards. Yet Jesus' response is unwavering: "Let it be so—for it's proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

And with that, Jesus, who knows no sin, enters the waters just as all the others did—not because he needed to, but as an act of solidarity with the long line of sinners seeking redemption in the muddy waters of the Jordan. It was an act which would demonstrate what the whole of Jesus' life and ministry, death and resurrection would be about: to set the world in right-relationship with God—and he does so right there in the Jordan River by immersing himself in our human experience, even so deeply as to die, so that we might know of God's love and mercy, of God's power and peace.

I'm reminded of one of my favorite children's books that I read to my kids when they were little and now get to read to Maggie and Parker. In "The Runaway Bunny," Margaret Wise Brown tells the story of a little bunny who pretends to run away from his mother who lovingly promises to follow him and enter his world of pretend no matter where he goes.

When the little bunny imagines becoming a fish in a trout stream, the mother bunny says, "If you become a fish in a trout stream, I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you." When the little bunny says, "If you become a fisherman, then I will become a rock on a mountain high above you", the mother bunny replies, "If you become a rock on the mountain high above me, I will become a mountain climber and will climb to where you are"... and so goes this story through several imaginary scenarios. It's a seek and find story that reminds me of Jesus not only finding us where we are, but seeking to really **know** our human condition.

Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit priest who founded Homeboy Industries, the largest gang rehabilitation and re-entry program in the world, writes in his book *Tattoos on the Heart* of his parish's choice to minister in areas of Los Angeles no one dared enter. His words resonate with me when I think about the leadership qualities of Jesus that Matthew is conveying: He wrote, "Jesus was not a man *for* others. He was one *with* others. There's a world of difference in that. Jesus didn't seek the rights of lepers. He touched the leper even before he got around to curing him. He didn't champion the cause of the outcast. He was the outcast. He didn't fight for improved conditions for the prisoner. He simply said, 'I was in prison.'" Boyle continues to write, "The strategy of Jesus is not centered in

taking the right stand on issues but rather in standing in the right place—with the sinners, with the outcasts, with those relegated to the margins.”

When Jesus waded into the waters, he stood with the outcasts, with those relegated to the margins. He stood with sinners like us—in order that he might fulfill all righteousness and make God’s love transformative. Matthew wants us to know that’s what kind of leader Jesus is...

And isn’t it compelling that Jesus was depending on John’s consent, John’s willingness to put aside his feelings of unworthiness to baptize Him? And in doing so, John is participating in God’s unfolding kingdom. Just as the saying goes: “it takes a village to raise a child” —God must have known it’s going to take a deep and wide community of believers to bring about God’s reign on earth. Jesus and John working together. Jesus and us working together. Jesus and this community of faith and that community of faith and all communities of faith. And gosh, we’d feel as unworthy as John, but In the end, Jesus comes to each of us as he came to John, hoping for our consent, our cooperation, to join with him in bringing about God’s vision so others might know God’s deep love and grace and forgiveness.

Though John seems to know who Jesus is, to the other folks gathered that day, he’s just one of many who are lined up waiting for John to dip and raise in the river. So Matthew tells us that as Jesus emerges from the baptismal waters, something extraordinary happens that without a doubt sets Jesus apart: The scripture says that the heavens break open and the Spirit of God was so unmistakably present that it looked like a dove lighting on him. I don’t know if it’s from those illustrations in my Bible when I was a child—you know the ones that are in color and on a little thicker paper and speckled throughout children’s Bibles—but I picture this brilliant light from heaven, zeroing in on Jesus like a spotlight—maybe a light as bright as that star the wise men followed—but I imagine it was something that drew the attention of all the bystanders that day.

Not only is Jesus a leader who meets us where we are, who stands in solidarity with us as sinners in order that we might know God’s goodness and mercy, but he’s also a leader who is empowered not by not by his own charisma, but who is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

And then a voice from heaven makes a public declaration. Whereas in Mark and Luke's versions, God is speaking to Jesus, in Matthew's version God speaks to everyone: "This is my son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

Of all the hints that Matthew has given us thus far as to who Jesus is and what kind of leader he'll be, this is the mic drop moment—in case someone isn't paying attention: this man from Nazareth who came to John in the wilderness is God's beloved son—the one in whom God delights—and HE is the One who will be inaugurating a new era of God's work through the power of the Holy Spirit.

If I were there on the banks of the Jordan that day, I imagine that'd be quite an Epiphany.

At the end of that first week of our pilgrimage, we had a free day in Tiberias to pack up, take one last walk down to the Sea of Galilee and soak in that scene before we would head to Jerusalem for our last week in Israel. I had a longing to see a little more of the Jordan River, more than that little stream we sat beside that afternoon. Somehow I wanted to experience the river like I envisioned it in my mind's eye: deep and wide and sacred. So one of my cohorts Susan and I rented a car in Tiberias, traveled north and followed pictures on road signs to a river outfitter somewhere north of Tiberias. We got out our shekels, paid to have a rickety bus take us further north, and with a "Shalom" to the bus driver, we were let out in the middle of nowhere on the banks of a little river with a kayak and two oars. (Just saying that out loud makes me wonder what in the world we were thinking...)

On our hour and a half trek down the river as it merged with another river and divided again, it was nothing really like that oil painting in the baptismal pool of my home church.

As you might know, water's hard to come by in that part of the world, and over time, much of the water from the Jordan has been diverted for irrigation and drinking water, so it was shallow and narrow in most parts.

Most of the banks were wooded on both sides, which actually did make me think of the wilderness, but there was one stretch that had a shoreline on both sides—a recreational spot for the locals, maybe.

There were some couples here and there, stretched out on blankets, picnicking or soaking in the sun. I saw some children splashing each other at the water's edge. There were some

tents for folks who were camping there for the weekend—maybe having a little too much fun based on the amount of discarded cans that littered the ground around them. And down the river a-ways, after the shoreline ended, there were some tattered sheets tied to trees that were perhaps someone’s permanent shelter.

It was nothing like I thought it would be. Nothing much felt holy about the waters we were floating down.

But as we continued to row, kayak scraping the riverbed at times, it occurred to me that what IS holy and sacred and a bedrock of my faith is that the sinless Son of God gathered with regular Joes in an out-of-the-way place to be baptized in a local river at the hands of a local preacher. Claimed as God’s beloved Son, empowered by God’s Spirit, he went to work ... meeting lepers on the outskirts of villages to touch and heal them; entering the home of a despised tax collector and breaking bread with him; preaching to the poor and oppressed and calling them “blessed”... and wading into the water with people as diverse as those I saw along that northern shoreline that day—inviting us—bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks and all—to join him in making God’s presence known and to help them hear God’s voice, calling them BELOVED.

God of light and life, as we gather today to reflect on Jesus baptism, we thank you for immersing us in your grace and calling us your beloved children. In these winter days when darkness can feel overwhelming, we pray for your light to shine, guiding us and all who struggle to see the way ahead.

We lift prayers for our world, O God, with its conflicts and division, its poverty and despair. We pray for those enduring violence and displacement, asking for your peace to reign where fear dwells. Guide the leaders of our churches, our communities, and our nation, granting them wisdom and a commitment to justice, rooted in your Truth.

We lift prayers for our own community, for those who feel fear, sorrow, or loneliness as this new year begins. Tend to the bruised reeds and flickering flames among us, offering them your gentle presence and strength to continue. Inspire us, your Church, to go about doing your Good, reflecting Christ’s profound mission to bring healing and hope.

Renew our baptismal vows, we pray. May we be living sacrifices, offering ourselves to bring glory to you in all we do. Strengthen us to share your light and love, to be beacons of your peace and to act with generosity and courage.

Hear our prayers O God, for your light shines even in the deepest dark. And teach us to pray and take these words to heart, saying: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.