

The Baptism of Jesus – January 8, 2107 Nigel Taber-Hamilton St. Augustine’s, Freeland WA
Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

If you’ve been to the Holy Land and to the Jordan River you’ll know that it’s not much like a river in North American terms – for most of its length it’s not very wide – mostly no more than 30 feet, only occasionally as much as 60 feet. Nor is it fast-flowing. For most of its length – south of the Sea of Galilee – it runs through a deep river valley. Its origin is in the snows of Mt. Hermon, north of the Sea of Galilee through which it flows, and it continues straight south down to the Gulf of Aqaba and the Red Sea.

This is the “Fertile Crescent:” the place the first stirrings of civilization happened more than 9,000 years ago. And from then right up to today the River Jordan has played a central role. Along with the the Tigris and Euphrates, the River Jordan has been at the heart of human flourishing, part of the Cradle of Civilization.

That’s especially true with the Jordan, because what the Jordan brings is water to a region that otherwise lacks it. Today, for instance, the majority of Israel and the West Bank’s water comes out of the river Jordan-fed Sea of Galilee.

That’s been true throughout the history of the region – the Jordan’s the only river in the Holy Land, and its name and presence permeates the bible: its mentioned in the Old Testament about one hundred and eighty times, and in the New Testament fifteen times. So while the Jordan literally runs through ancient and contemporary Israel, it’s a spiritual presence that permeates both Judaism and Christianity.

For our ancestors

- The nomadic, desert-wandering tribes crossing of the Jordan “on dry ground” to enter the Promised Land and settle there marked a major turning point in their history.
- It was across the Jordan – again dry-shod – that the prophets Elijah and Elisha.
- It was in the River Jordan that the Syrian general Naaman was healed of leprosy after washing in its waters at Elisha’s direction.
- And, of course, it was in the Jordan that John the Baptist baptized fellow Jews, including Jesus, as we heard today.

Water! 80% of the human body is water. Without water for just a few days our lives would be in danger; add a few more days and there would be no human life. Without water for any part of a season there would be no crops and thus no food. Water also cleans things, freshens them, washes away dirt, water makes new. It’s hard to underestimate the importance of water to life! And in the barren, dry places, it was – and is – worth its weight in gold.

Its because of this central role in human flourishing – and especially in the ancient land of our ancestors in the faith – that water was and is used in our sacred rites. And used not just in dribs and drabs but lavishly, frequently, generously.

But today it’s so easy to get disconnected from water’s value to human existence and flourishing!

Turn on a tap and water comes out. Go into a grocery store and there are shelves and shelves of it. The danger in that for us as people of faith is that we can get disconnected from the powerful water metaphor that underlies permeates baptism – our baptisms – as a sign of the power of God’s Spirit to sustain us, to permeate our living and ourselves, to offer us the possibility of our flourishing.

So what about that story in Matthew’s gospel? Yes, we’re celebrating the baptism of Jesus – and we’re also celebrating our own baptisms. And as we do so, on this day, we’re also remembering that they both took place in water: the water that gives life.

Here, in his actions and words, is John the Baptist recognizing Jesus’ unique relationship with God, and doing so by cautioning about whether he should baptize Jesus *in water*. Did Jesus need to be baptized by John? No. But Jesus insisted – not because he needed to be baptized but as a statement of solidarity with all who struggle to experience God in transformative ways – and that would include us. Jesus’ baptism firmly places him in relationship with us, just as our baptism places us firmly in relationship with him.

As Jesus rises from the Jordan, a dove descends and God’s voice is heard, “this is my beloved with whom I am well pleased.” Was that necessary for Jesus to hear? Hardly! *But Matthew thought it was important for us to hear!* For Matthew, *Jesus’ baptism and God’s affirmation was and is an affirmation that Jesus is part of our story and that we share in God’s love just as Jesus did.*

And today this story of baptism is also a reminder to us that in our own unique way we embody God’s holiness in the same way that Jesus embodied God’s holiness, because with Jesus we are all recipients of God’s grace.

There’s a challenge here, too. Yes, we are all recipients of God’s grace. But who’s the “we?” That’s where the Acts passage come in. Acts describes the boundaries – or, actually, the lack of boundaries – of that grace. *In acts, God’s grace embraces Jew and Gentile alike.* Cornelius’ household receives God’s grace just like orthodox followers of Judaism. No one is excluded from divine mercy or love, Acts says.

And there’s the rub! It’s convenient and common for us to rejoice that we – so much like each other in so many ways – are included in God’s grace. It’s much harder to hear – let alone rejoice in – the divine proclamation that *everyone* is included. In Europe and North America (and maybe elsewhere on this small planet) it seems that we’re more polarized than ever in every sphere of our lives. Sometimes it’s easy to assume that God’s grace is absent from those with whom we disagree. *Acts say that’s not so – the passage speaks about the unbroken interdependence and unity of humanity. We’re all standing in the need of grace, we’re all finite, we’re all broken, we’re all dependent, and we’re all mortal. And God’s grace is offered to all of us regardless.* Today says that all are welcome to share in the waters of grace because we’re all God’s beloved children. Today God says to all of us – each and every one – “you are my beloved.”

Let us pray: Holy God help us to remember that it is only by your grace that we are brought

together as the one and only family of humanity. Forgive us those small and large betrayals that say so much more about us than about the other. Remind us that it is only through the water that is life that we live, and that it is only by the waters of divine transformation that we can continue to do so. We pray in your most holy name. Amen.