

# Stepping into the Jordan River

# Matthew 3: 13-17

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Across the history of the people of God, the Jordan River has been a place of deep import. Many events which matter greatly take place there. Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann points out that “it is at the Jordan that Moses interprets the Torah, that Israel enters a land of freedom [after generations of slavery in Egypt], and that Elisha receives Elijah’s spirit.” In the context of such rich history, Brueggemann suggests that “when Jesus approaches John on the banks of the Jordan River”, not only is all this collective memory put into play, but more than that – “we are jolted all the way back to the first chapter of Genesis, as the separation of earth and sky that God established at creation is refigured. God breaks through in order to speak directly to human beings.”<sup>1</sup>

The Jordan River is a geographic location which exists on the map. It is a place to which one can travel, and I know that some of you have traveled there; have visited the river bank identified as site of Jesus’ baptism. When we read Matthew’s Gospel account of that baptism, we realize that the Jordan River is more than a geographic location. For the people of God, it is also a spiritual place, one to which we all feel connected, which we all hold dear, whether or not we have seen and smelled and touched the water which flows between its banks. With our feet or with our faith, Christians step into the River Jordan as we seek to

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Norris, “Marked for a Purpose”; Christian Century; 12-25-2007

be faithful followers of our Lord who traveled from Galilee to Jordan that he might step into the water to be baptized by John.

When Jesus arrived at the riverbank, joining the crowds who were coming to John for baptism, John hesitated. Matthew is the only gospel writer who includes this dialogue between John and Jesus, and he doesn't give any indication of how John knew who Jesus was or how he recognized that Jesus was not in need of repentance. Jesus has not yet begun his public

ministry, but somehow John knows him as the One to whom John should submit. *I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?*

The first words we hear Jesus speak in Matthew's gospel are words of obedience: *Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.* These words from Jesus are an announcement that he will honor God's intention for his life. He will participate in the realization of God's realm, that realm in which righteousness is fulfilled; in which justice and peace prevail; where all that has been damaged is healed and all that has become estranged is reconciled. Jesus steps into God's will by stepping into the Jordan River.

John has become well-known for his ministry, which offers a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And so we ask: why does Jesus come to John to be baptized? We affirm that Jesus is without sin, so he does not need John's sacrament to redeem his own life from sinfulness. Jesus is not baptized for his sake, but for ours. It is on our behalf that he fulfills all righteousness by undergoing John's baptism. Humanity stands in need of forgiveness. Jesus is baptized so that humanity may be made righteous in him. With his baptism, he models for us obedience to the fulfillment of God's will and purpose; he enacts his love for and connection to humanity. "The very beloved son of God, sinless though he is, submits to the waters of baptism. Matthew Myer Boulton puts it like

this in his book, *God Against Religion: Rethinking Christian Theology Through Worship*: Imagine the Jordan River, a line of unwashed sinners on one side, waiting anxiously for baptism, and a line of those newly washed clean on the other. And now comes God the Son, Jesus of Nazareth, the only one among them all who might truly claim to be clean and pure, and he proceeds to get in line with the sinners ... he crosses the Jordan, so to speak, in the opposite direction: from 'clean' to 'sinner', from insider to outsider ... he confirms his solidarity with sinners by submitting to baptism.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus doesn't need to be baptized to bring his own life into line with God's, for Jesus is already and always fully obedient to God's call upon him. Rather his baptism brings Jesus' ministry and

all the lives touched by that ministry – in first-century Israel and in every time and place since – to a broad place where righteousness is fulfilled and we who are baptized in his name are freed to live as his disciples in glad obedience to the will and purpose of God. That idea – that Jesus is baptized for our sake rather than his own – has important implications for our baptism.

Christian theologies of baptism often highlight the benefits to the individual being baptized. We affirm that baptism symbolizes forgiveness of sin, inclusion in the community of faith. Through baptism, we die to the old self and are raised to new life in Christ. And all of that is true and precious.

But what happens if we carry our theology of baptism to a broader place. What if we ponder the idea that our baptism is not for us alone, but for the community,

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<sup>2</sup> Jill Duffield; Lectionary Commentary; p. 45

or indeed, for all of creation. What if we consider the possibility that when Jesus and John fulfill all righteousness at the Jordan River, they inaugurate a new age in which each of our baptisms, all of our baptisms, participate in the fulfillment of righteousness throughout God's realm?

We can find theology that suggests baptism grants to the baptized access to God's love and grace – ushers us into the inner sanctum, as it were; teaches us the secret handshake of the saved.

But our salvation does not rest on any action we take. We are saved because God loves us. Baptism is our recognition of and response to God's initiative of love and grace. God does not love us because we are baptized. Because God loves us, we come to the font to express our gratitude for that love and our commitment to live as God's beloved, working to bring God's realm. Theologian Mark Abbot puts it like this:

Baptism gives public witness to God's saving grace, one's new birth in Christ, and incorporation into Christ's body. At the same time, it is a commissioning for God's mission that we share with Christ. Baptism is a rite of passage that signifies the on-going story of God's redemption of God's people, and a marker of our being sent into the world to make disciples.<sup>3</sup>

There are many ways Christians around the world and through the years have stepped with the feet of faith into the Jordan River to respond to God's saving love since that day when Jesus met John on a river bank in first century Israel

Twentieth-century German theologian Dorothee Söelle tells this lovely baptism story in her book, *Celebrating Resistance: The Way of the Cross in Latin America*:

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Abbott; *Connections, Year A, Vol. 1*; p. 175

In Rio, a group of Christians was working with street children, of whom there are twenty-five million in Brazil. Every day boys from the street got together at one spot to chat, to discuss their problems and to share their fears and anger with one another. Many came regularly. The church people consisted of a Catholic priest, a Methodist, a priest of the Umbanda cult, a Presbyterian, and a young Lutheran pastor.

One day, one of the boys said, "I would like to be baptized."

"In which church, then?" asked the Catholic.

"Which church? In ours here, of course."

"But to which church building would you like to go?"

"Building? No, to our church, here on the street. I want to be baptized here among us."

The Methodist said he couldn't issue a certificate. The Catholic thought it wouldn't be possible to perform jointly with the man from the Umbanda religion. The boy stuck by his wish. Finally, the pastor organized the necessary things: he laid a board over two crates and filled an old boot with water for flowers, which the children provided. The Catholic brought along a candle. The baptism took place on the street, in the name of Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup>

When the church – wherever it may be: at the river bank, in an sanctuary, on a street corner -- baptizes an infant, or a child, or a teen, or an octogenarian, it is a corporate act of faith. All of us who are present step into the Jordan River alongside the individual being baptized so that we may serve as companions and friends on a shared journey of faith. But we also step into the Jordan River to be

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<sup>4</sup> Dorothee Soelle; *Celebrating Resistance: The Way of the Cross in Latin America*; Mowbray, 1993; p. 78

reminded of our own baptisms – to feel again, in and through this sacrament, the presence and the movement and the power of the Holy Spirit who guides our lives. More than that, each baptism draws us back to the scene of Jesus coming to John on the banks of the Jordan River so that they might together fulfill all righteousness and thereby open up a space of righteousness in which we are all able to dwell.

In this Christmas season, we have heard the angels sing “Hallelujah!”. We have seen the star guide wise men to the new-born king. Now we feel the water flow around us as we step into the Jordan River at the baptism of our Lord. Each of these experiences reminds us that the eternal Word has become flesh to dwell with us here in the incarnate world. The infinite God has been born as one of us. Jesus Christ our Lord has come close enough for us to see and touch; close enough for us to hear him speak and to follow him as he leads us into righteousness. May we respond with both feet and faith.

Amen.