

### Down to the River

I've been to the Holy Land twice, and both times I was struck by the vital importance of water. Israel/Palestine is for the most part very dry and arid. And so any place where there is a source of water, especially fresh water, it's a big deal. We went to a place called En-Gedi, close to the Dead Sea. This is where (as we read in 1 Samuel 23) a young David hid out for a time when he was being hunted by King Saul. There is a spring there, which produces a stream, and at one point a fifteen-foot waterfall, that I went and stood behind (of course getting drenched in the process). We went to the oldest part of the city of Jerusalem, where one can still walk through a place called Hezekiah's Tunnel. Or I should say "wade through." It's a cramped, 583 yard long passageway, completely underground, that safely supplied fresh water to the inhabitants of Jerusalem during times of siege. And it ends in the Pool of Siloam, where in the Gospel of John Jesus sent the man born blind in order to be healed.

And then of course we went to the Jordan River, which flows from its source at the foot of Mount Hermon, southward into the Sea of Galilee, and then all the way to the Dead Sea. The river today is an extremely important source of water in Israel/Palestine. And it's extremely important throughout the entire Bible, mentioned 211 times. One of these being Matthew 3:13, which we just heard this morning, where Jesus was baptized by John. You can see an actual picture of the Jordan River on the back of the bulletin insert. Add a few cottonwoods and sand bars, and flatten it out a bit, and it doesn't look all that different from our own Ninescah River.

Why was it important for Jesus to be baptized at the beginning of his ministry? This was John the Baptist's question when Jesus came to him to be baptized in Matthew 3:13. Which Jesus answers by saying "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." By which he means, fulfill the requirements of the Torah. Baptism originated, in the Old Testament, as a "ritual cleansing" of the body, in order to be in a fit condition to come into the presence of God (we find an example of this in Exodus 30:17-21). But in the time of the New Testament, John the Baptist appears to have changed the meaning of baptism. In all four gospels, John proclaims baptism as a sign of repentance, rather than ritual cleansing. Which explains why he objected at first to Jesus' request to be baptized. What did Jesus have to repent of, if he was truly the Son of God? To which Jesus replied, as we heard, "Let it be so now." As if to emphasize his own humanity. As if to stand in solidarity with us. As if to say to us, as he said on other occasions, "What I do, you also should do."

Permit me to point out just a few features of this story in Matthew, as a way of drawing out their meaning for us as well. First, Matthew tells us that Jesus came to John at the Jordan River from Galilee, which had been his home. In other words, Jesus was on a journey. A journey away from the comfort and familiarity of his boyhood home, a journey into all kinds of uncertainties, unknowns, questions. His baptism in the Jordan River was merely one step, albeit a crucial step, on Jesus' journey of faith and faithfulness, a journey which ended in his death and resurrection.

Second, John the Baptist didn't feel worthy to baptize Jesus. But it didn't matter. John was merely a vessel, a human conduit. It was God who blessed the baptism, and recognized its

significance. It was the Holy Spirit who ratified it, by alighting on Jesus in the form of a dove. Let me assure you, there are all kinds of ways in which I am not worthy to baptize Sarah or Joe or anyone else. But it doesn't matter if I'm worthy. I am merely a human vessel.

Third, after Jesus was baptized and came up out of the dirty, chilly Jordan River, the very voice of God sounded from heaven. "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." And then Matthew said that "suddenly the heavens were opened." How we long for God to say the same thing of us: "This is my son, my daughter, my child, who I love, and with whom I am well pleased." How we long for the heavens to be opened to us. But that is indeed what happens, every time one of us submits ourselves to the ritual of baptism, whether it's in the Jordan, the Ninescaw, or at the front of the church sanctuary. Because baptism is among other things a statement of our desire to be a follower of Jesus. To which God, and Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, and yes the heavens themselves, all reply with a hearty, enthusiastic "yes!"

Permit me to also point out a few features of our passage from the Book of Acts, telling the story of Lydia's baptism. By the way, I have also been to the site of ancient Philippi. I stood on the banks of the stream that still flows there today in commemoration of Lydia's baptism. In fact, I went "down to the river," and waded into it, as a way of renewing my own baptismal vows.

First, as we heard, Paul and Silas (and possibly even Luke) all set sail from Troas in ancient Asia Minor and "took a straight course" all the way to Philippi. Once again, we see the significance of water, this time the ocean, and this time as a means of conveyance, a way of getting Paul and his companions from point A to point B. And indeed, we can even see the hand of God in this, calling them, guiding them, bringing them to this next stop along their journey. Just as God continues to call and to guide not just Joe and Sarah, but all of us.

Second, Luke says that "on the Sabbath day" they went—where?—down to the river. To a spot that apparently was a place of prayer. Which makes me think of this place, of Camp Mennoscaw, along the banks of the river, another special place of prayer. Lydia was there, and after hearing whatever was said by Paul (which undoubtedly was something about the gospel of Christ, maybe even something about the significance of water and of baptism), Lydia wanted to be baptized, chose to be baptized. Much as Sarah and Joe are choosing to be baptized today.

Third, Luke doesn't even tell us who baptized Lydia, whether it was Paul or Titus or Luke or anyone else. Because apparently that wasn't what mattered. What did matter was that after being baptized, Lydia was so overjoyed and moved that she invited the others to come and stay at her home, extending hospitality to them. As if to say that baptism will almost certainly result in a response of some kind on the part of the one baptized—a response of joy, and gratitude, and commitment to their ongoing journey of discipleship. Hank and I are grateful for and humbled by the role that we each will play in Joe and Sarah's baptisms today. But we both recognize that we are merely conduits, that it is not in our name but in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit that Joe and Sarah will be baptized.

And so here in just a few minutes, I will invite all of us to go "down to the river." A few of us will actually wade in; the rest of you can remain on the bank or the wooden walkway. But let us go, prepared to recommit ourselves to be Jesus' disciples, prepared to hear and feel God say about each one of us, "This is my child, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased," prepared to have the very heavens opened up to us in celebration. Amen.

Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20).

Because of Jesus’ commandment and promise, we are here today. For this reason people make the covenant of baptism with God and the church. We are witnesses to their choice and companions to it.

Baptism is an act of God, of the church, and of the believer. In baptism, God gives us a good conscience and the seal of the Holy Spirit. Baptism enacts what God has done with us: made us dead to sin and alive to Christ. As an act of the church, baptism vouches for the faith of the believer and affirms the work of grace in her and his life. As an act of the individual, baptism enacts his and her surrender of the old self and the embrace of a new self, born in the image of Christ.

I invite Sarah, Joe, and Pastor Hank to come forward at this time.

[Name], on your confession of faith in Jesus Christ, I baptize you with water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. May God baptize you with the Holy Spirit from above. Amen.