

Grace Episcopal Church , Galena, Illinois
January 10, 2016

Sermon by The Rev. Gloria G. Hopewell, D.Min.

"New Beginnings" (Rev.)

Texts: Isaiah 43: Luke 3

For several years now, it has been possible for tourists and pilgrims to visit the site believed to be the actual place where Jesus was baptized by John. Actually, there are two such sites, on opposite banks of the Jordan River, separated by just a few yards—one in Jordan, the other in the West Bank of Israel Palestine. Each, lobbying for the tourist business tries to authenticate its own history. It appears that Jordan may be winning—three Popes have now visited, including Francis, and the Roman Catholic Church plans to build a chapel or visitors' center there.

It was the other site—the one on the West Bank—that a group of us tried to reach some years ago. Excavation was just about to begin in Jordan. We didn't even know about that one, and at that time pilgrims who wanted to be baptized did so far north of this place, closer to the Sea of Galilee. The West Bank site was in a militarized zone, and entry was only by special permission.

Nevertheless, we set out from Jerusalem on our tour bus one fine morning, traveling into the Judean wilderness a bit southeast of Jericho not far from where the Jordan River flows into the Dead Sea.

It was our intent to reaffirm our baptisms, to rededicate ourselves in the waters that we hoped were truly where Jesus was baptized by John. We knew that there might be a problem reaching the site, but, naively, we did not understand the reason until we were confronted by barbed wire fences, a security check point, and armed soldiers. Our Israeli guide spoke with the soldiers and we were allowed to enter the area—a military zone running the length of the river that divides Israel and Jordan. We drove for a long while through some of the most desolate land I've ever seen. There were no buildings or other vehicles—only rocks and scrubby bushes. Not another soul was near. Finally, we reached the road that we would take to the Jordan River. But it was barricaded by a huge fence covered with loops of barbed wire. The driver pulled over to the side of the road and we climbed out of the bus after being warned that we should not wander away. (We soon discovered why when we saw, on each side of the road, yellow signs warning us of mine fields.)

As we stood there in that barren spot, feeling the full force of our shock and disappointment, a jeep with three soldiers drove up, Uzis slung over their shoulders. Our guide assured them that we were merely pilgrims wishing to see the Jordan River. He tried to talk them into letting us through. They laughed and told us to come back in October when pilgrims would be allowed in. Then they drove on through the barricade and locked it securely behind them.

We gathered, then, in a circle on the road behind our bus. Our leader pointed toward the horizon where a distant clump of green trees marked the location of the river. He read to us the Gospel account of Jesus' baptism, and then we prayed and sang all the verses of "Amazing Grace" that we were able to remember. Each of us was given the cross we were to have received at the rededication.

Later that night, as I lay in my bed in the hotel room, I thought about our singing. Surely there was a more appropriate song than "Amazing Grace." What, exactly, was there about the experience that had anything to do with grace? It took awhile, but insights came to me. We are so accustomed to being able to go where we wish when we wish. We are able to worship freely and to come and go in those places that hold meaning for us. But there, in the Judean wilderness, we came to realize that that kind of freedom is not available to many of our sisters and brothers in the world. To those who face hostility and violence day after day. There, in the midst of barbed wire and mine fields we came face to face with this stark reality and experienced for ourselves the pain of being shut out, excluded, and denied our rights. Perhaps there was a small measure of grace in the new understanding and perspective we gained in that moment. And in standing in solidarity with all who have been rejected and oppressed.

I also began to think of the importance of the Jordan River in our biblical tradition. We had tried to go there because it was the site of Jesus' baptism. But its significance goes back much further to the time of the Moses and the Exodus. Moses, of course, never crossed the river himself, but he led Joshua and the Israelites to this very same spot where they entered Canaan, the Promised Land. Remember how the waters parted when the priests waded into the river carrying the Ark of the Covenant and remained separated until all the people had crossed over? Later, this was also the spot where Elijah parted the water before he passed his mantle on to Elisha and was taken up to Heaven in the whirlwind. None of them reached or crossed the Jordan River easily. For the Israelites, it happened only after they had wandered for forty years in the wilderness! Struggling through "many dangers, toils, and snares" before "Amazing Grace" led them home!

All of this biblical history has made the Jordan River a meaningful and symbolic place, mentioned nearly two hundred times in the Bible. I like to believe that is why John the Baptist chose the same spot for his baptisms. "Crossing over" has come to mean change, moving to a better place or state of being. To the Promised Land, a new way of life, or even, as one of the Spirituals says, "I look over Jordan and what do I see...a band of angels...comin' for to carry me home."

The Jordan River is symbolic, but so is the simple substance of the water. Both the water and God's Spirit were present in the story of Jesus' baptism.

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.

This was a transforming moment—for Jesus and for the world. It was the beginning of a new age, a new creation. The story of Jesus’ baptism is told in all four Gospels. Think about it for a moment. As far as we know, Jesus comes out of an obscure and humble life in Nazareth. He walks a distance of about 125 to 130 miles through harsh and rugged terrain to the wilderness where a man dressed like an itinerant prophet, in camel’s hair and leather is preaching repentance and the forgiveness of sins. For John, repentance meant turning toward God to embrace the new age of salvation that was dawning. And with the tearing open of the heavens, and the descent of the Spirit on Jesus, a new creation begins. It was a defining moment—a new beginning in which Jesus was affirmed by God and received the Spirit as an enabling presence for his public ministry.

There is little evidence that Jesus ever baptized anyone himself, only his command to the disciples to go out and baptize in his name (Matthew 28:19). What biblical record we have of baptism is clearest in the book of Acts where Peter and Paul and the other apostles went forth to do just that. Whole families—including children and servants—were baptized, and Christian baptism came to be differentiated from that of John by the presence of the Holy Spirit to those baptized in Jesus’ name. When the church became the official faith of the empire, under Constantine, many people were converted, and, at that time baptism was for adults and took place after a long period of study as well as an examination of their lives to be sure that they had changed their way of living, their behavior, in ways that were faithful for followers of Jesus. The church understood that being disciples of Jesus and people of the new age did not simply mean believing in Jesus and living according to his teaching. It also carried with it a call to serve others and to work toward God’s justice and righteousness as people filled like Jesus with the enabling presence of the Holy Spirit.

It was later that the custom of baptizing babies became the norm, and as we know, there is not agreement about that among today’s Christian churches. Some churches baptize only those who are old enough to make the commitment to Christ. Others baptize babies and make these commitments for them until they are old enough to affirm these vows for themselves. Some emphasize the water, some the Spirit. Through the ecumenical movement of the late 20th century, mainline Christian churches came to a wonderful convergence of beliefs about baptism—that baptism, whether it takes place with infants or those who have reached the age of reason, is a one-time, unrepeatable act. That it is initiated by God but requires our response. That it takes place not as a private rite but within the community of faith. For it is not just parents or godparents who make promise for the child. It is the whole church—the local congregation acting on behalf of all Christians—committing to support and nurture the one baptized in the faith. And, to live their own lives in a way that is a model for others. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes I worry that baptism has become too easy. No need to walk through the wilderness. Or for three years of the catechumenate. Just have a talk with the priest, gather the congregation, the friends and family, and sprinkle a little water. For some, it is simply the family’s expectation, or an insurance policy or a gold-plated admission card to Heaven rather than a commitment to the promises that are made and call to discipleship.

Fortunately, this one time sacrament of baptism can be reaffirmed over and over again. That happens when a child reaches the age of confirmation. It happens when a person joins a new church. It can happen when an individual experiences a time of spiritual growth and wishes to publicly revisit the commitments of baptism. And, it can happen in a periodic reaffirmation each time a new person is baptized or in a special celebration like today. As we make our way back to the font for this reaffirmation, please reflect on your own baptism. You may not remember that day, that occasion. But remember that through baptism, God is made known to us and we are marked as children of God, incorporated into the body of Christ. We profess our faith and commit ourselves to following God's way. The water we use is symbolic of the waters of creation and of new birth and beginnings. The words we use to perform the ritual act of baptism call upon the presence of God as the divine Creator, the person of Jesus Christ, and as the sustaining presence of the Holy Spirit.

3

The Spirit of God is with you, my friends. Blessing you and creating in you new life. Again and again and again.

Amen.