

Baptism planning used to make me anxious, but now I love it. I didn't get any training or instruction on how to prepare people who were going to be baptized, or their parents and godparents, and in my last parish, there were several families who resisted having any preparation at all. But seeing Skyler Peters's enthusiasm as we talked through the baptismal rite in the Prayer Book transformed my attitude and gave me a new perspective. It wasn't exactly the heavens splitting open like St. Mark described, but I'll take it! And so when Kent and Nancy Rosenbaum emailed me yesterday to start planning their daughter Nora's baptism, of course I was delighted.

Occasionally we all need to be reminded of the power of baptism, and so the Church in her wisdom celebrates the baptism of Jesus on the first Sunday of her season focused on celebrating the manifestation of God's power, the season of Epiphany. And the more we know about the story of the baptism of Jesus, the more powerful it is for us, and the more it can help us in our own lives of faith.

Like we do most weeks, in Bible study last Thursday, we studied the readings we'd be hearing this Sunday. I wanted to explore the symbolism of the Jordan River. I pointed out that there were other bodies of water with symbolic meaning in the Holy Land. What if, rather than making the people of Jerusalem and all Judea come to him, John had come to them and baptized at the pool of Siloam, which was already a popular destination for pilgrims to Jerusalem, and would be the site of one of Jesus's healing miracles? Baptism is something of a pilgrimage, and could be described as healing our souls.

What if he had chosen the Sea of Galilee, which would not only be the setting of much of Jesus's public ministry, and multiple miracles, but was also a thriving commercial center? The symbolism could have been enormous, since baptism connects us with Jesus, and is a way that God connects to the world, by equipping us for ministry to our neighbors. Or why settle for that small body of water when the vast Mediterranean Sea was available? That would have symbolized the primordial waters of chaos, and indeed, in baptism, we are a new creation by God's grace.

And then, of course, there's the Dead Sea. For some people, the notion of being baptized into Jesus's death is quite powerful, but I must confess that the idea has never done much for me. And as fun as it is to swim, or really, float, in the Dead Sea — unless you get your foot stuck in the mud and have to have other pilgrims pull you out — I can assure you, that water is the opposite of cleansing. You feel slimy when you come out because of the intense concentration of salt and other minerals. Today the resorts there have showers, and I was grateful for that, but of course, it wasn't that way in the ancient world.

But then, at Bible study, one of the participants asked a question that seemed to shut down that line of thinking. "Couldn't John have chosen the Jordan because he lived near there?" Well, in a way, that's just right. While Luke's Gospel tells us that John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, lived in a town in Judah, and that town had to be

within commuting distance of Jerusalem so that Zechariah could fulfill his priestly duties, Luke also tells us that when John grew up, “he lived in the desert until the day he appeared openly to Israel.”

But that raises the question of why he lived there. People didn’t live in that desert wilderness by accident, and they certainly wouldn’t move there from a relatively comfortable town without a very good reason. And I think the reason is that for John the Baptist, everything he did was part of his God-given mission of preparing the way for Jesus, and John used symbolism very effectively. His clothing reminded people of the prophet Elijah, and his diet showed both his complete dependence on God and his purity from worldly contamination. The desert wilderness was understood to be a place where the spiritual world was particularly accessible. So what about the Jordan River? What would it have meant to the people John was trying to reach?

The Jordan is a boundary or transitional place, and a place of healing. Joshua crossed the Jordan to lead Israel into the Promised Land, on dry ground; Elijah and Elisha had a similar miraculous crossing; and Elisha cured Naaman of his leprosy by ordering him to cleanse himself there. And, of course, the Jordan made fertile and prosperous a land that would otherwise be barren desert. These are powerful ideas to connect to baptism. Baptism is a transition, too, a profound transition into new life with Jesus, an entrance to a miraculous closeness with God, and transformation of our souls into realms fertile with blessings.

The baptism of Jesus heightens the meaning further. Just as Joshua’s military crossing prefigured a successful conquest, so to does Jesus’s peaceful spiritual manifestation prefigure a spiritual victory. And the victory that Jesus would go on to win is even greater than Joshua’s conquest, for while Israel would eventually lose its political sovereignty and be taken into the Babylonian Exile, the spiritual sovereignty God establishes in baptism can never be thwarted.

We could also easily overlook the fact that this story happens at the very beginning of Mark’s narrative. At this point in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus hasn’t said or done anything at all. And yet, God tells him, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” While we might tend to think of the Johannine writings as the ones that express the idea that “we love because God first loved us,” John was merely making explicit an idea that also underlies Mark’s Gospel. In her magisterial commentary on Mark’s Gospel, Dr. Adela Yarbro Collins observes that “the emphasis is on the divine initiative.” This way of introducing Jesus dramatically underlines the concept and the powerful reality of God’s grace. No one earns God’s favor; no one but Jesus ever could be good enough, and even Jesus had to submit publicly to God to set in motion his ministry of perfect servanthood, a ministry that was not for his own benefit, but rather, is God’s free gift to us.

In like manner, when we submit to baptism, God blesses us. God gives us the free gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism, uniting us to God forever and empowering us for a

lifetime of ministry. Just as God directly gave John the Baptist everything he needed to live in the wilderness, God also gives us everything we need to live out our faith in our baptism.

God's words in this story identify Jesus as God's son, as a king, and as a servant. Isaiah understood that the ideal servant of God is willing to give up everything and suffer if God calls them to do so. In the same vein, the gifts God gives us by the Holy Spirit in our own baptisms are not primarily for our benefit. We may derive some incidental benefit beyond the simple joy of loving and serving God and our neighbors, but God's gifts are primarily for the benefit of others. Just because we are baptized with water does not make us islands! Quite the contrary; baptism connects us with God and other Christians in the only social network worth being on.

Finally, the image of God descending like a dove doesn't appear in the Old Testament, but it does call to mind the spirit, or wind, of God sweeping over the face of the primordial waters of chaos. And Mark must have known the great Homeric epics which describe Greek deities coming to earth in this way. Well, the world is still a chaotic place, thanks to evil and sin. So, Mark is telling us that God, who created the world, is now intervening in a direct and specific new way. This isn't just good news, this is thrilling news!

In a way, nothing could ever truly prepare us for baptism, since baptism is at its heart something that God does, and God is unpredictable. The life of ministry baptism initiates in us will inevitably take us to surprising places and people. But the more we know about God, the better we feel about God and what God might do, since we discover more and more how profoundly God loves us and deals graciously with us. Knowing God better helps us to recognize what God is doing, how, and why, and should make us less anxious, and more confident and joyful, about what God might have in store for us next.

God's grace flows into the world through the floodgates of souls. God is the source of all grace, so it is not scarce, but God allows us to open the gates as wide as we like, or not. Open the gate you can open and encourage others to do likewise, that the river flowing out of the church might grow broader and deeper, until the desert of the world becomes an ocean of grace.