The Baptism of the Lord

It was quite the experience. On my sabbatical a few years ago, not only did we have the opportunity to visit the baptismal site on the Jordan River. Every one of us had the chance to wade into the water and renew our baptism. Better yet, a week or so later we were able to go to the second baptismal site, have a prayer service, renew our baptismal promises, and I sprinkled our group with water dipped right out of the Jordan River at the site Jesus was baptized!

Wait a minute you may be thinking. Jesus was only baptized once! True, but in Israel there are two baptismal sites for Jesus’ baptism, one just as the Jordan flows out of the sea of Galilee, in the North and one just before it flows into the Dead Sea, in the south.

My reason for bringing the experience up is not because I think you would all be interested in a travelogue. I find thinking about the two different sites a powerful modern day parable that might shake us up, in a good way, as we think about the Baptism of the Lord, and our own baptism.

Until about the 14th Century, Christians made pilgrimages to the southern baptismal site, south of Jericho. 5 large churches were built, guest houses, etc But after the Arab conquest, the site fell into ruins. It was not a place safe to visit, and in essence it was lost. After the modern day founding of Israel, that area around the Jordan river was a military zone between Jordan and Israel, with mine fields, watch towers, barbed wire etc..

So in 1981, Israel established the second site, in territory firmly in the hands of Israel. All kinds of improvements were made: wide concrete stairs leading down into the river, which at that point is quite clear, clean and beautiful. It’s a lovely place. Nice parking area, interactive displays, changing rooms … souvenir shops: all the modern amenities and conveniences.

Meanwhile, after rediscovering the true baptismal site in the south, and the peace treaty with Jordan, the authentic site was de-mined. It was excavated, the ruins of the various early churches were unearthed and while very rustic, with much muddier waters, reeds in the river, and a simple wooden deck to access the river, the true site is now accessible.

Where is the parable?

The majority of pilgrims only go to the northern site: the sanitized, domesticated, touristy site Yardinet. Getting there is a snap. Going into the water is like toading in the shallow end of the pool. You can even take home nice momentos.

The true site isn’t nearly so quick and convenient. When folks went out to be baptized by John in the Jordan, getting there was not a snap. You had to travel through the Judean desert, which was known for bandits. Remember the Road to Jericho, Good Samaritan story? That’s the road you have to take to get to the true site.

Back in the day, that is, John the Baptist’s day, once there, repentance was expected, not comfort and status quo. As to Jesus’s baptism, the one we commemorate today: he didn’t go back north with sweet memories and nice momentos. He went immediately into the desert, where he was tempted, and very shortly after overcoming temptation, he was facing down demons. He was confronted by powerful folks who found his message, His mission, his behavior a threat.
The life of someone living in God’s grace takes one beyond our comfort zones. It includes temptations and opposition. But we aren’t asked to go into uncharted territory. Jesus preceeded us, right from the water of baptism, and he is with us all the way. He doesn’t try to gloss over the challenges. He describes the journey as taking up a cross and following him, not enjoying a lovely vacation. But he also makes it clear, this is the only path to fulfillment, to peace, to Gospel joy and to eternal life.

Our images of baptism may well be reflective of the reinvented baptismal site of Yardinet: sanitized, domesticated, scoured of anything that might present a challenge. How often do we think that approaching baptism is summoning the courage for a daring journey?

Is baptism a photo op, a tourist attraction for a brief visit, or a powerful encounter with Jesus, the beginning of the life of discipleship? Is it staying in our comfort zone, or being stripped of the cozy comforts that can be so attractive, so that we can be immersed in what is truly of value, what is more precious than sweet memories by the water?

Our prayers for baptism capture it, but I’m afraid it is easy to let them go in one ear and out the other.

From the anointing before baptism:

Almighty God, you sent your only Son to rescue us from the slavery of sin
And to give us the freedom only your sons and daughters enjoy.
We now pray for this child
who will have to face the world with its temptations,
and fight the devil in all his cunning.
Your Son died and rose again to save us.
By his victory over sin and death,
Bring this child out of the power of darkness.
Strengthen this child with the grace of Christ,
And watch over him or her at every step of life’s journey.

Which baptismal site do you think would be the best location for that prayer? Facing temptation fighting evil, coming out of darkness, strengthened by the grace of Christ? Praying it in a former military zone that had to have the land minds removed – That seems to fit in my mind.

At a baptism, when renewing our vows, we hear:

Do you reject sin, so as to live in the freedom of God’s children?
Do you reject the glamor of evil, and refused to be mastered by sin?
Do you reject Satan, father of sin and prince of darkness?
Where would that best be addressed? A comfortable tourist attraction, or a site where battle is joined, and victory won? How do you think of baptism?

Now for a closing Year of Mercy thought. The battle is often more inside than outside. One important step – recognizing that sin and selfishness make empty promises. When we fall for those empty promises, and we all do in one way or the other, the promised happiness eluding us. Here is a fine examination of conscience – what empty promises have a bit of a hold on me?

Baptism is the beginning of a journey that can conquer the selfishness that blocks mercy. Baptism can open us up to love. When we reject temptation to be self-centered, and allow ourselves to humbly welcome God’s mercy, a transformation takes place, we begin to live the Christ life, and we begin to radiate that mercy to others.

Another good way to move from a Yardinet approach to baptism to an authentic, baptism of the Lord approach to baptism? Rediscovering Jesus. The book truly can help. There are more copies at the entrance if your family didn’t get a copy this Christmas.

We are God’s beloved. Jesus is our brother. Life is so much better in a close family. Families become close the more we get to know one another and share each other’s lives. Learning more about Jesus brings us closer into his family, the community of believers. The invitation into that wonderful family began at our baptism. May we say yes to the invitation, to Jesus, and to one another!