

“Jesus at the Jordan”

January 10, 2021

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11

As the Israelites entered the Promised Land for the first time following their escape from Egypt, their leader, Joshua, brought them to the bank of the River Jordan. At the river he stopped their advance and challenged them to think about what they were about to do. He called them to make a choice. They could cling to the old ways they had left behind them or they could commit themselves to the God of Israel who led them all that long way. Whom would they serve? Would they serve the gods of Egypt and hold on to their old identity as slaves; or would they serve the God of Israel and become a free people. Stepping into the Promised Land, crossing the River Jordan, meant becoming something completely new and leaving the past behind.

That’s why John is there calling the people out from their homes and villages, out from the city and the temple. He’s calling them to make a new crossing. To renew their commitment to God as a way of preparing themselves for a future about to unfold. That’s what baptism is about. It’s a passage from one life to another. For John that required turning away from everything they had learned about how God works in the world. All the authorities, all the rules, all the certainties they had used to construct their lives had to be let go. That may not sound exactly like sin, but sin is more than just breaking rules. It has to do with missing the mark, being cut off from communion with God. Confessing sin is a way of acknowledging that condition. Sometimes even when we go through all the motions of piety we can still be left feeling alienated from God.

So it may seem odd that Jesus is among this gathering of pilgrims. Why would he have felt the need to join them? Every baptism is a crossing, a passage from one life to another. Jesus was about to leave his life behind. He was about to embrace a new calling. We don’t know anything about his motives, really. We’re told he was there, maybe out of curiosity, maybe out of need, and that he was baptized with everyone else. But we do learn something different happened to him. Do you notice the perspective? We see the heavens torn open and the Spirit descend from Jesus’ point of view. No one else around him sees what he sees or hears the words from heaven conferring a new identity on him. Did he expect it? Did it startle him? We don’t know.

But I suspect the reason we’re let in on it is this experience made a profound impression on him. It changed him in some fundamental way, and it established the direction of his life. That’s what happens when we make these crossings. They change us...assuming we’re open to being changed. Jesus’ decision at the Jordan to leave his past behind, to embrace a new identity, is more than just another event in his life that we’re commemorating. In his baptism he enters our experience, takes on our struggles, and provides us a model for making our own crossings.

This week I think we reached a boundary point in our society. I was heart-broken when I saw that angry mob of rioters make their way into the Capitol Building to disrupt the certification of the results of the presidential election. And I do hope the people involved are held accountable. But I do think they represent a deep undercurrent of fear and hatred in our country. It seems to me that many of them are clinging to a past marked by injustice and bigotry that's been beneficial, at least on the surface, to White people at the expense of Black and brown people. I know that's not their only grievance but in our history race has always been what animates that kind of violence.

The riot at the Capitol has brought us to a River Jordan moment. The Promised Land Joshua helped his people enter wasn't just about material prosperity. It was about the establishment of a new way of knowing God in the world and of being a people committed to living the compassion and love of God revealed in Torah. I like to think we are being called to a new way of being a people and what we witnessed on January 6th was a last desperate gasp of a dying world. We had a chance to see just how vile and bankrupt that old worldview, rooted in white supremacy and fear, really is. And it's time, past time really, to leave it behind us. It's time to cross the river, to be baptized into a new life.

So, today I invite you to stand with Jesus at the Jordan. I invite you to join in acknowledging our complicity in the sin of racism and commit yourself anew to a life rooted in compassion and justice. God is calling us to cross the boundary, to leave the past with its fears and hatreds behind. We can be a new people, with a new identity as God's beloved sons and daughters, together in the beloved community of generosity, justice and joy.

Amen