

What Accompanies Us – Mark 1:4-11

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January 7, 2024

Occasionally, we travel to places that are so special to us that we want a piece of them to take home. We go to the beach, and we bring back a few special seashells. We go to that famous bar, and we bring back the glass the drink came in. Or we go to that famous golf course, and we bring home that shirt or hat with the club logo on it.

Joann Post is a Lutheran pastor who tells the story of a special trip she made and that special souvenir she brought back that didn't turn out like she thought. (*Christian Century*, Jan. 2024)

It was a cold day on the river—January in Galilee. I was with fellow pilgrims from the United States, traversing the Holy Land with hearts open and mouths agape. We walked where Jesus walked. We smelled the salty sea air he smelled. We ate food he might have eaten. And on that brisk, biting day, we stood on the banks of the river in which Jesus was baptized.

I had hoped we might wade in the river, but it would have been unwise to do so that day. The riverbank was slick. The water was dark and cold. I was not willing to risk hypothermia for a photo opportunity. But at the very least, I wanted to touch the water.

In true American consumer fashion, I also wanted to obtain the water. I wasn't interested in the prepackaged bottled Jordan River water available everywhere from street vendors; I wanted the real thing. Creeping carefully down the bank, I knelt at the river's edge with a small bottle I had brought along specifically for this purpose and scooped up a scant cupful of this veritable holy water.

Here's what I was imagining: the tap water in the baptism font in my congregation back home mingled with holy water from the Jordan. I was imagining the moving sermons I would preach, the clever analogies I would draw, the tears on the faces of those doused with the same water in which Jesus was plunged. Though I am not ordinarily a seeker of talismans and amulets, Jordan River water held a fascination for me. And in that moment, on the slippery bank of the river, I held magic in a bottle.

I flew all the way home from the Middle East with a vial of water from the Jordan in my carry-on bag. I stored it in a place of honor in my office, eager to uncork it for the next baptism. Several months passed. And by the time I went to mingle the local waters of the Mississippi with the exotic waters of the Jordan, my vial of holy water had turned to a vial of vile. Murky. Smelly. The bottom of the jar coated in sediment and the top in slime. I tossed it out, jar and all.

I should have known. The Jordan is a shallow, silt-filled river that carries agricultural runoff, sewage, and political unrest downstream. It's too shallow to boat on and too polluted to swim in.

Post was disappointed. Such a holy moment surely was deserving of a souvenir of the same value. And yet, she found it to be like that shell from the beach that gets tossed in the drawer, the glass from the bar that gets pushed to the back of the cupboard, and the golf shirt that gets lost among the others hanging in the closet.

They're all human items that don't match the significance of the experience in which they were found.

Here's another observation Joann Post makes of the reality of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan:

When John baptizes Jesus, Jesus is but one of many. Remember, people from the whole Judean countryside are coming to the river to be baptized by John. In our imaginations, as Jesus emerges from the water, a spotlight cracks through the sky and the world grows dark. As though onstage, Jesus gazes heavenward to see a ragged sky and a rocketing dove, to hear a voice that sounds like either James Earl Jones or Judi Dench, depending on your idea of what an authoritative voice sounds like.

But there is no spotlight. There is no stage. Jesus is dipped under the water by John's strong hands and then raised to his feet. Next! As though working an assembly line, John dips and raises, dips and raises. For hours. There is nothing magic about it. Just a long line of sinners in search of redemption in the muddy waters of the Jordan.

It's interesting Mark's language in verse 10: "And just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, *he* saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him." It's not clear that anybody else but Jesus experienced what Mark describes here.

For Jesus, what he took away from his baptism was not a vial of water from the Jordan, not a production that everybody saw that announced his messiahship. It was the personal assurance that he was beloved by his heavenly father.

“You are my son,” God said, “with you I am well-pleased.”

That’s it! No souvenirs, no accolades from the others around him. The baptisms were piling up—before and after him. He was one of many. Jesus’ takeaway was simply that God loved him.

A new year has started. As I asked on my midweek video this week, what’s next for you? Don’t worry about new year’s resolutions. Just ponder what’s next.

Is it an event you’re looking forward to? A divorce being settled? Is it tests being taken at the doctor’s office to know if your cancer is in remission? Is it a big graduation in the spring or a wedding of someone in your family? A due date for the birth of your grandchild? Is it a huge project at work that will bring with it unique stress and time commitments? Is it a trip—to the Holy Land maybe—that you’ve had on your bucket list?

What’s next for you in 2024? Today on January 7, there are many events that will take place that we can’t predict. Regardless, as you look forward to what you know is coming this year and steady yourself for what you don’t know is coming, your baptism is your first-hand reminder that you, too, are beloved by God. God is pleased with you.

During our last song/hymn, you’re invited to come to the font and touch the water. You’re not going to take a vial of it with you. You’re not going to be feted with praise from above. The heavens aren’t going to open and you’re not probably going to hear a voice. And you’re probably not going to see the spirit descending like a dove. As you touch it, know that God’s assurance for Jesus is your assurance: You are beloved.

Back in 1994, the Allman Brothers Band released an album called *Where It All Begins*. It included the title song, “Back Where It All Begins.” Here’s some of the lyrics: “When I was younger I was hard to hold/Seem like I was always goin’/Whichever way the wind would blow/Now that travelin’ spirit calls me again/Callin’ me back to where it all begins.”

Our baptisms are where it all begins. Especially as a new year launches, the challenges and opportunities in front of us are met and seized with the reality played out in baptism: We belong to God and in him we are well-pleased.

That's good news of hope and comfort for us all. That is the reality that accompanies us on our journey.