

In 2005, I had the privilege of visiting the Jordan River in the land of Palestine, the site of today's reading. The Jordan is not a wide river like the Mississippi – you can't take boats on it. It's perhaps better described as a stream or a creek, maybe 50 feet wide at most. For a river with so much Biblical history, it's surprisingly simple and unassuming. The locals have built several Baptismal centers on the river to accommodate the pilgrims who come to be immersed in the waters just as Jesus was over two thousand years ago. You can buy little vials of Jordan river water to take home and use for whatever purpose you choose. It seems an oddly appropriate blend of the secular and sacred – as is much of the Holy Land today.

It's easy to imagine the scene of today's Gospel. The people sitting on the banks of the river, the slow moving line of pilgrims coming to John as he stands knee-deep in the shallows. We can imagine him saying something to each person, perhaps a word of encouragement or a shared prayer. And then, to his surprise, the next person in line is his second cousin, Jesus.

If there is one question that arises almost every time this reading comes up in the liturgical cycle, it is this: why? Why did Jesus allow himself to be baptized by John? Even John is uncomfortable with the idea, saying "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?" Jesus insists that John proceed, with the somewhat cryptic statement, "...it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." What's going on here? Why is this simple action so important, if not momentous?

It's all about symbolism. It's all about getting beyond the obvious. It's all about recognizing that God works with all of the elements, past, present, and future:

- Why the Jordan? The Jordan River is the historical boundary between the desert exile and the Promised Land. Moses was not allowed to cross the Jordan River. When Joshua was given the mandate to lead the people into the Promised Land, he didn't just wade into the river. No, he had the Ark of the Covenant carried into the water first, and in a precise re-enactment of the Red Sea crossing, the river literally stopped flowing to allow the people to pass. The Jordan River is a symbol of transition – a movement into something new, into something of great promise. Jesus was entering the Promised Land.
- Why else the Jordan? The Jordan River flows from the Sea of Galilee in the North to the Dead Sea in the South. You need to go to the Dead Sea to appreciate why it's called that. Nothing lives on either shore. There is no outlet to the Dead Sea. The river water flows in, and that's it – it eventually evaporates. The River Jordan, in a very real sense, connects life and death. Jesus enters the Jordan to demonstrate his complete immersion into the journey we all take – from life to death. He is part of this, he is part of us. It is right and fitting that he do so.
- Why be baptized at all? Consider this. The last time God used water in the Bible was to flood the earth in order to "restart" the human race with Noah's family and a new covenant. Water was a frightening reality for first century people. Storms, sea monsters, floods – these were all part of the local legends. To many Biblical scholars, Jesus entering the Jordan is a sign that God is re-consecrating the waters

- of the world – is reconciling the purpose of water. Jesus is not simply baptized in the Jordan, he is in turn blessing the water by his presence, and in doing so, making it the premier symbol of Christianity. You can't claim Christianity unless you too enter the water and submit to it's cold reality.
- Then there's the dove. It's unclear in the reading who actually sees the dove and hears God's voice. It seems to be only Jesus in Mark and Luke's versions, but here in Matthew's version, God seems to be proclaiming the Son-ship of Jesus to everyone. Regardless, this is clearly a moment of amazing validation for Jesus, that he is on the right track, that his ministry is beginning. It made such a huge impression on Jesus that immediately afterwards, he heads into the desert to fast and pray and discern what to do next. Jesus takes on a mission.

One of the joys of being a Deacon is performing baptisms. It is especially delightful when the family having the baby baptized really understands the meaning of the sacrament and enters into the ceremony with awe and reverence. Of course, we get families who treat baptism as a sort of magic "stay out of limbo" act, or worse yet, as a family naming ritual, with no meaning other than a cultural tradition and a big photo opportunity. We try to prepare the parents and godparents, of course, but it's hard to give someone a present when they aren't present to the gift. Which leads to the next question, "Why baptize infants?" Simple answer really – the Holy Spirit. Let me explain.

A child under the age of seven is an amazing creation. There is a wonderment to life, a reaching and trying and tasting and yes, falling and crying that reflects the innate curiosity of the human being and the slow formation of what it takes to learn the ways of the world. Hopefully, the child finds many more positives than negatives and comes to trust the goodness of creation. It is this very openness that makes Baptism particularly effective. A child has no barriers to the Holy Spirit, no suspicions, no gritty armor. The child is an open door. Yes, I would also prefer that the parents and godparents be just as open as the child is to the Spirit, but even if they aren't, I know that the child is. And just as the Spirit of God cannot be channeled or tamed, so too is that little squirming bundle of joy. Baptisms are delightfully unpredictable, just as God is.

I assume that most of us here are baptized. How many were baptized as infants? Adults? It's interesting that most of us here were not intellectually aware, or conscious, of our own Baptism. This is surely one of the perceived drawbacks of our practice of infant baptism. But that doesn't mean that the Holy Spirit wasn't present or hasn't been active since that long ago day. The Holy Spirit hangs on long after the water dries off. It's incumbent on us to consider the following. How has the Holy Spirit been active in your life since your baptism? Can you identify times and events where you were inexplicably guided to a good choice, or avoided a truly disastrous situation? How would your life had been different if you weren't baptized? Obviously, this is pure speculation, but if the opportunity is there, I would suggest that you talk to people who were present at your baptism. What were they thinking? What was their prayer for you that day? Has it come true?

And there are other possibilities as well. Whether you remember your baptism or not, you are frequently given the opportunity to *renew* your baptismal vows. This happens at every baptism you attend. Although it appears to be a simple shorthand for the Creed, I invite you to take it a bit deeper. It is meant to be a reaffirmation of something you perhaps were not able to say when you were originally baptized, but can say it now. Your "I do" in response to each question is a thank you to God, to your godparents, to your parents, to whoever took the time to make this a priority, on your behalf. What a generous gift! And as you know, the best response to a gift given is to give a gift in return. Not to God (he doesn't really need gifts), but to other people on God's behalf, and that is the best thank you of all. Generosity begets generosity.

Simply put, the act of giving yourself to another on God's behalf is the definition of what it means to be a Christian. That's why the generous action of inviting someone into the Church family is the gift that keeps on giving, the very nature of the Church's mission. Now do you see why Jesus got baptized? It truly was a momentous event. Now I invite you to please stand and renew your baptismal vows.