

## **“The Real Thing”**

Sermon: Year A, Epiphany 1, Baptism of our Lord

Text: Matthew 3:13–17

Preached: January 12, 2020 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace and peace to you from the God whose voice thunders over the waters, calling us “beloved.” AMEN

Several years ago, I had the great privilege of touring Israel and Jordan for three weeks, seeing a lot of the archaeological sites mentioned in the Bible. It really helped make the scriptures come alive for me. During that trip, I got to see the place where Jesus was baptized by John. Well, actually, I should say “places,” plural, because there are two main rival baptismal sites, both purporting to be the “authentic” site. The first one we visited is set in a beautiful park up in the northern part of Israel, in the Galilee, along the banks of the Jordan River, which is wide there, and gently flowing, very picturesque and restful, a green and cool retreat from the hot sun. There are shade trees all around, covering beautiful flagstone terraces leading down to the water with gentle stone steps so that American Christian church groups can come and get themselves baptized—or rebaptized, in most cases—in the waters of the Jordan. We won’t dwell on the theological problems of getting rebaptized. Baptism is actually a “one-per-customer” event. In case you didn’t bring your own from home, you can buy a white baptismal robe right there in the shops... along with little souvenir bottles so that you can smuggle Jordan River water home with you as a keepsake. Top the experience off with an ice cream bar or an expensive Coke, then get your souvenir photo taken, delivered to you in a genuine cardboard frame with the words, “I visited Jesus’ baptism site!” emblazoned across the top of the picture just above your face, so you can remember the experience forever. The baptism of our Lord meets Disney World.

The second site of Jesus’ baptism is not nearly so scenic, not nearly so picturesque. It is further south, across the river on the Jordanian side, near where the Jordan empties into the Dead Sea, east of ancient Jericho. It is reached by a bus ride through poverty-stricken Jordanian towns plopped down in the middle of scrubby desert. Goats scramble around abandoned tires, bleating. You pull up to a visitor center of sorts, but it’s more an information center with a few explanatory placards. Then you set out down a trail through gray, dried-out mudflats, feral cats wandering around through the scrub brush, an inhospitable place all around. You wend your way through this brushy wilderness, descending toward the river. At some point, you come upon a few simple wooden shelters that cover the remains of three ancient basilica-style pilgrimage churches...though there’s not much more to be seen than a couple of pillar bases and the remnants of a marble floor or a mosaic. As you near the river, there are a few olive trees here and there, and some rushes. And then you arrive at the baptism site, which is accessed by a few wooden steps that look like your backyard deck. The river here is a muddy little stream, barely flowing, stagnant, foul. It seems that at one point even in recent history the Jordan at this spot was a rapidly flowing river, rushing down to the Dead Sea. That rushing water was probably what Jesus and John saw. But the Israelis and Palestinians and Jordanians and Syrians have all dammed the river upstream to siphon off water for agriculture and human uses, and pour wastes into it as a natural sewer. So now it is perhaps 20–30 feet across, and so filled with sediment that the water is brown, and a sign warns you not to enter the water. It’s hard to imagine what it might have looked like when Jesus came there to be baptized. On the other bank, just yards away, is the barbed-wire-enclosed Israeli visitor’s center for this second baptismal site, poured concrete and dirt, looking like a bunker, accessible only with permission from the military, a silent testament to the strife that tears this holy place apart and walls these two countries off from one another. Here there are no souvenir vendors, no pretty terraces, no ice cream machines...just a simple standing baptismal font crudely hewn from limestone.

Two such contrasting sites: one beautiful, idyllic, orderly, almost antiseptic and plastic ... the other a barren wasteland bearing the gritty marks of human greed and ignorance, and the emblems of human violence. Now, which would you prefer to be the authentic site? And which do you suppose is almost certainly the authentic site? Well, not to burst your bubble, not to ruin your fantasies, but it is the second site, the disappointing site, that archaeologists agree is the most likely site of Jesus’ baptism. Scripture says that it was across the Jordan, and that John the Baptizer was out in the wilderness, a desert-dweller, and those pilgrimage churches are among the most ancient church remains we know of, suggesting that folks revered this site from the most ancient times. Scrub brush, feral cats, muddy water and all, this is probably where Jesus’ public ministry began. It turns out that the Israeli Ministry of Tourism established the other site as an “alternative pilgrimage site” when the likely authentic one became inaccessible to tourists as a result of military strife.

I'm still wrinkling my nose. I still have a vague sense of disappointment. Like many of us, I was raised on Sunday School art with its idyllic renderings of biblical scenes. I remember the tree-filled painting of the mighty River Jordan that surrounded the baptistery in that little Baptist church where I was baptized by full immersion. I want cool, green, shady Jesus, not dried-out-mudflat-and-muddy-water Jesus! I want sparkling, crystal water and a glistening white robe in a lush landscape. Throw in a few orange trees in blossom! OK, maybe the authentic site was a *little* more attractive in Jesus' time, but the fact is, this has always been wilderness, surrounded by wasteland. Why would Jesus choose such a God-forsaken landscape to get baptized in, and to launch his ministry?

We want God to come to us in beauty, in majesty, in calm, in tranquility, in lushness. We want Jesus to come to us in a garden where he walks with us and talks with us and tells us we are his own, not calling us out to some nasty, barren wilderness where the earth is cracked because it hasn't tasted water in months. We want God to come to us in peaceful, happy homes where our children are always grateful, our spouses never disappoint, where financial problems never loom, and where illness never darkens our door. We want God to come to us in a lovely church building, in an assembly where beautiful, loving people who are always orderly and thoughtful and kind and unselfish gather and always make one another feel good, not in a ragtag, messy assembly of people who behave sometimes in ways that hurt or offend, or otherwise fail to meet our expectations of perfection, a bunch of bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks, who sometimes act in ways that do not match our status as children of God. Surely this can't be the place, we think, if it's not perfect! How can God be present, we wonder, if all is not a perfect paradise?

But you see, that's *exactly* where God comes to us. The wilderness is the whole point! God loves to show up in the wilderness, in the unexpected places of our world and of our lives. Jesus, in going out to that place we would call God-forsaken, shows us that there is *no* place on this earth that God has forsaken, no place where God cannot be encountered. God, ripping open the heavens and calling down into that wilderness, and then descending peacefully, dove-like into that setting, shows us that it is precisely in our wilderness experiences, in our disappointments, in the unexpected places of our lives, that God shows up to claim us as beloved daughters and sons, to bring us peace, and to refresh us for service to our world.

We want perfection, we want paradise, we want everything to be just right. We want a Disney World world, and when we don't get that, we think that surely God cannot be present. But out there in the wilderness, in those moments of deepest disappointment, when we ourselves feel like that parched ground that is cracked from long being a stranger to water, we remember that it was in the wilderness that God gave his people Israel water from the rock. It was out in the wilderness that Jesus was bathed in God's cool, life-giving water, and rose out of that water to set about healing this world. In our parched times, God bathes us and refreshes us once again with a reminder of the cool, fresh water of our own baptism. It is in remembering our baptism, in God's water made life-giving through God's Word, that we can once again experience God's Spirit coming to us dove-like, bringing peace and energizing us for service. It is in our baptism's refreshing waters that we can be reminded over and over again, even in the wilderness, and maybe especially in our wilderness, that we are God's beloved, God's chosen, God's sons and daughters in whom God takes delight. It is in the wilderness that we as individuals, we as the people of God here at Immanuel, Just like our brother Jesus, are anointed and sent to love and to serve. Thanks be to God. AMEN