



Reflection #8

Remember Your Baptism

To be a pilgrim is to venture from home, to go far away, and, then, return home. As I write to you I am nearing the end of my first year of a very un-pilgrim experience. I have left home, ventured a distance, and, now, began a new chapter of my life. I not only left a place; I left a life. This is the opposite of pilgrimage. A pilgrim ventures out and returns.

In the scriptures there are many, many stories about leaving a place, leaving a life. Abram is called from the land of Haran. His call is to leave his kin behind and venture to an unknown land. Joseph calls his father and his brothers to come to live in Egypt. Moses frees the slaves and guides them to an unknown land. In the eighth century B.C.E. the Assyrians will conquer the northern, ten tribes of Israel (Samaria) and take them away never to be seen or heard from again. In the sixth century B.C.E. the Babylonians will do the same to Judah only there would be a remnant who would return as “Jews” to Palestine. The return, though, was of after all those who left had died. The last key moment of departure is 70 AD when the Romans expelled all the Jews from Palestine and created the diaspora.

These are key moments in the history of Israel. These are the moments of living as nomads, refugees, slaves, migrants, and people seeking relief. I moved to New Jersey to receive a new call; I am not a refugee nor slave. The only danger I continue to face right is learning how to drive on the turnpike again. My plight is nowhere near as consequential or profound. And then again, the experience of being uprooted and transplanted does have a common thread be it Babylon or Brooklyn.

I mention this because the travel to Israel/Palestine is a pilgrim. We will return.

Yet, this pilgrimage is also unique path. There are many places of pilgrimage. What makes Jerusalem/Israel different is baptism. Although you can travel to a retreat and take part in a service where you remember your baptism, standing in the Jordan River is unique. For many years I offered the experience of remembrance to folks in worship on “Baptism of the Lord Sunday.” There is much grace and power to be found in such moments. In Israel, in Galilee, in the Jordan River, though, the experience is unique.

The water in the Jordan has no magic power. If you reaffirm your baptism in the Jordan, your baptism is no less or no more than it was before. And yet, the act of going to the place of Jesus’ baptism is more, it is different.

The difference is not in the water or in the baptism, the difference is in you. If you open your heart to this unique experience, your faith will change. In the remembrance we experience here at home, we are remembering in what God is doing. When you stand in the Jordan, you are in the midst of what you are doing as well. What will come of this action? Will you make the most of it? Will it serve as a guide for you? Those are questions to ask after the pilgrimage. The questions now are this: what does it mean for you to remember your baptism? How does baptism guide you now?

Let me offer the three classic examples of baptism.

First baptism is for forgiveness. Baptism is the moment of washing away the stains and marks of misdeed and sin. To be baptized is to trust in the mercy of God to remove the destruction, the darkness, in us.

Second baptism is a moment of identity. We call out a person's name when he or she is baptized. It is a defining moment. Here we see and know that you are a beloved of God. As Jesus emerged from the water the voice said, "this is my son, my beloved." In baptism we are so identified.

Third baptism is an engrafting. Churches welcome the baptized; congregations vow to nurture the baptized; and, most often, there is cake in fellowship hall after a baptism. The one who is baptized is now a part of a community. He or she is rooted and grounded in the love of the community. Hence, in the Presbyterian Church to join a new congregation you are asked to reaffirm your baptismal vows so the congregation is now free to love and accept the new member as a beloved who enjoys the mercy of God.

This week I would encourage you to consider each of these.

- Are you artful in forgiveness?
- Can you ask for forgiveness?
- Do you see yourself as a "beloved" of God?
- Do you trust in the voices that say, "in you I am well pleased?"
- Are you part of a community of faith?
- What does it mean for you to welcome someone to a congregation?

I would strongly encourage you to sit with these questions. Some might not be a challenge. Others might be a bit of a stretch. But if there is one that is a stumper, something with a wound, maybe even a fear, then you are close to the question that will help you prepare for the pilgrimage.

When we arrive in Galilee and venture to the place where the Sea of Galilee empties into the Jordan River, there is a lovely place to change, to buy souvenirs, and to gain safe access to the river. This will be the place for you to ponder the question and perhaps find a blessing that will change your life.

As a matter of full disclosure, though, I want you to know that this is not the traditional site of the baptism of Jesus. The place where we will enter the Jordan is about eighty miles away from the place where John baptized all of Judea. The traditional site is at the place where the river empties into the Dead Sea. This is a place of stark and harsh landscape. Here the water is salty and muddy and you need to venture out into the desert to reach it.

The reason for the different location is a matter of safety and security. The pilgrim site is available to all. To reach the historical site, which is possible, has an element of danger and thus it is not open for all. I say this because the historical site has a feature the pilgrim site does not. The historical site has contradiction. It is place of life and death. It is not clean water; it is muddy and silty and salty. Here you are in the confluence of birth and decay.

To fully prepare yourself to remember your baptism you need to not only find the question that opens your heart, you also need to recognize the limits of life, the fragility of our experience. A journey where you leave your life for a new one has this built in to the experience. A pilgrimage is different. Here we are not to experience the limits of life as much as we are to ponder them. Please prepare your hearts for the journey. Find your question for baptism so you may remember and be blessed.

Below is a photo of the historical site of the baptism after a spring rain flooded the desert. This is what it may have looked like at the time of Jesus.

