

Sermon: "It Changed Everything."
Sunday, January 8, 2012
The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector
Christ Church, Shaker Heights
Epiphany I, Year B: Is. 42:1-9; Mark 1:7-11

Before departing for our parish pilgrimage to Israel this past October I asked our group of pilgrims to be alert as to which sites on our itinerary they found to be spiritually significant? Or better put, what places would be those Celtic thin places where the curtain between the holy and them became palpably permeable and thereby transformative?

I did this to set the stage for us be reflective about the spiritual component of our travels, as well as to foster conversation with one other as we traveled through the Holy Land.

In retrospect I also think I asked our pilgrims to do this because on my first trip to Israel in 1994 those places that I anticipated being spiritually transformative—like the Church of the Holy Sepulcher—by in large were not. Conversely those places I gave little thought too as being spiritual were among the most profoundly thin places I encountered. My request was somewhat of a test to see how the pilgrim's experiences meshed with mine.

Well, the results of the test were mixed. Some of the places I found to be thin places in 1994—like the shore of the Sea of Galilee—were in fact thin places for some of our pilgrims as well. And some places they found to be thin places on this trip—like the Western Wall—were not particularly spiritual for me.

What was really interesting though was that a place I found to be a kitschy tourist site in 1994 was transformed into a profoundly thin place for me in 2011. That place was the River Jordan in which Jesus was baptized.

There is tourist site on the River Jordan called Yardenit in Hebrew, which means "Little Jordan." Yardenit is located near the southern mouth of the Sea of Galilee and is specifically designed to handle the busloads of Christian tourists who come to experience the River Jordan. A long promenade wends its way above the river's western bank with several sets of steps going down to the water from it. Along the riverbank there are numerous concrete platforms and wading areas to accommodate those Christians who practice adult baptism or re-baptism. Yardenit is a busy, noisy, crowded place with hundreds if not thousands of people many singing hymns. Among these are those who people who are clothed in white robes as they are baptized by very loud and exuberant pastors. The place has the feel of a Pentecostal tent revival, albeit without the tent.

This environment clearly prevented me from experiencing the River Jordan as a thin place on my first pilgrimage. I allowed all that stuff to get in the way of experiencing God. But this time things were different.

Our group found a place that was removed a bit from the hubbub. Rolling up our pant legs we entered the Jordan's waters where we engaged in some happy banter, a little playful splashing and picture taking. And then someone made a request to be blessed and soon the Rev. Melanie and I found our selves taking handfuls of River Jordan water and blessing people's foreheads with it. It was truly a thin place experience standing in those waters, waters in which Jesus stood for his own baptism and "he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending [on him] like a dove [with] a voice [that] came from heaven, [saying]"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

It was a very moving moment for me and I believe that it resonated equally as powerfully with most of the other pilgrims as well. I like to think that some of us may have heard God's voice or felt the flutter of the Spirit's wings as she descended upon us!

Why was this experience at the Jordan River so profoundly different for me the second time around? Why did a place that I found objectionable on my first visit become a holy one on my second? Part of the answer lies in the seventeen intervening years of theological reflection that I brought with me the second time around. And before you go and think that by theological reflection I mean my seminary education, I don't. Rather I mean the kind of thoughtful engagement with the Bible and prayerful reflection about our faith journey that we all can—and should—engage in as Christians.

What I have come to understand during those years is that everything changed when Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan. His baptism brought about a seismic shift in the relationship between God and humanity. As Jesus emerges from the water the opening of the heavens symbolizes the start of a new mode of communication between God and humankind, one never before experienced in humanities relationship with God. Where once God had sent signs and messages to prophets and sages to convey how God desired his children to live and behave, now God imbues Jesus as his "Son, the Beloved." And in Jesus we do not get just another messenger of God to bring us God's word, we get God himself in Jesus. We get God's Word made flesh.

Everything changed in Jesus' baptism. That is why the experience of standing in those waters and blessing people and being blessed was so profoundly spiritual. We were standing in the waters where everything changed between God and us.

The prophet Isaiah once foretold that when the Messiah came the people who walked in darkness would see a great light; those who once lived in a land of deep darkness—on them would the Messiah's light shine.

That is what happened when Jesus emerged from the Jordan's waters. The darkness that held people captive to sinful behavior toward one another was vanquished in the brilliant light of his word.

There is a stunning painting above the baptismal font in St. George's Anglican Cathedral in Jerusalem portraying Jesus' baptism. The monitor in the Great Hall has a photograph of that painting for you to see. The artist used brilliant, bold colors and brush strokes to portray that very moment Jesus comes up out of the water. We get a view of the top of his head with his arms outstretched over the blue and green sun-dappled waters. Behind him is a burst of blindingly white light that breaks into a radiant fan of gold, orange and red rays that reach for the heavens.

Those rays in the painting are symbolic to me of the light of Jesus' Word—the Good News of the Gospel—being splashed over the entire cosmos as darkness flees before it.

We will honor today's Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord by renewing our own Baptismal Vows in a few moments. The essence of the Good News that Jesus splashed across creation in those brilliant rays of light is contained in those vows.

We will be asked to continue in the teachings of the Apostles so we hold fast to the Christian faith received through the ages. We will be asked to pray for one another seeking God's presence in all matters of our life. And we will be asked to break the bread of Communion, the symbol of our unity through Jesus. These three things are the essentials of being a Christian.

We will be asked to persevere in resisting evil in the world and to proclaim by word and deed the Good News of God in Christ. And then most importantly we will be asked to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves and to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being. These last two are the crucible of the Good News. Following them is the power of the light that drives away darkness and allows God's children to be bathed in the radiant light of Jesus.

We renew these vows because through Jesus we know these to be the core values of God. We know by Jesus' life that they are the way of life for us. The vows of the Baptismal Covenant are the foundation of God's reign begun at Jesus' baptism in those blue and green, sun-dappled waters of the River Jordan. They are the reason why everything changed for humanity in that moment.

As we renew our vows today imagine the life-giving waters of Jesus' baptism splashing over you, renewing your commitment to follow Jesus. Feel the warmth from the light of those brilliant rays of new life that changed everything for you, for me and for all of God's children.

Amen.

