

Down to the River

Word on the street was that he was a great preacher. A strange, bit unusual, but great preacher. When I heard that he was going to be at the river, I, a 13 year old 1st century Jew, decided that I would join my friends to see him.

We walked the 5 miles down the dirty dusty path and there he was.

“Repent! For the kingdom of God is near.”

John was indeed strange. His hair was a mess and his beard was wild. He wore clothing made from itchy camel’s hair. Word on the street was that he ate bugs. While we didn’t witness this first hand, we could see how easily that rumor got started.

After John finished preaching, he made his way into the river. When the water was just above his waist, he turned to the crowd and said, “I baptize you in water, but soon one will come who will baptize with the Holy Spirit....Who wants to go first?”

I had no idea what to do so I filed in line. When it was my turn I stuck my toe in that frigid water...I stood staring at John. “Come on in,” he said, “It’s ok.”

So I made my way to him. When I got to him he said, “Repent.”

“Repent? What does repent mean?”

“Have you broken any of the laws recently?” he asked.

“Well, my mother made a new dress and asked me if it made her look big. I told her no, but the truth is, that dress was not flattering.”

John laughed, “Well, ok, but what I want to know is if there is something that has kept you from God? Has something happened that causes you to turn away from God?”

“Well, I know we are supposed to love our neighbors and ourselves. If I am honest I don’t love all my neighbors and I also struggle to love myself. I should, God made me and made my neighbor. I need to try harder on that one.”

John said, “Yes, try harder and know that God will forgive you.”

Then John placed one hand over my mouth and nose and helped me under the water. When I came up the water caused my vision to blur and as I began to see more clearly I saw John looking into the distance. My eyes followed his gaze. A man was coming down the river bank....

The man waved. Slowly a smile came across John's face and returned the gesture.

John took off out of the water. I didn't know what to do so I followed him out of the water and to the river side where the man stood.

I tried not to eavesdrop but I couldn't help myself

"Hi!"

"Shalom! How are you? How's your mom? How's your dad?"

"They're great. You should see this new table dad and I made."

Then the man said, "John, I have come here because I want YOU to baptize me."

John replied, "No. Absolutely not. YOU should be baptizing me!!!"

Who was this? Who was this man that John says should be baptizing HIM?

The man placed his hand on John's shoulder and said, "No. It is the right thing to do in order for us to fulfill all righteousness."

I was so confused. Then the two men walked to the water. You could see them talking and laughing and when they got to where the water was about waist deep, they stood for a moment. It looked as if they were praying. Then John placed his hand over the man's mouth and nose and helped him into the water just as he did for me...but when he came out of the water...it was different..

The sun shone so bright that you had to squint to see anything. You could see the sparkle of water dripping from his head as if in slow motion. It was so quiet you could have heard a pin drop. Then, a voice, as if from heaven said, "This is my son, my beloved, with him I am well pleased."

This man...This man was the one John had told us about. This man was the son of God. This was the messiah, this man was Jesus...

(Sung)

As I went down to the river to pray, studying about those good ol ways and who will wear the robe and crown good lord show me the way, O children let's go down, let's go down, come on down. O children let's go down...down to the river to pray...

Have you ever thought about this? Have you ever wondered what it must have been like, being at the Jordan, witnessing the baptism of Christ? Have

you thought about your own baptism? Some of you may remember yours. Others of you probably don't since you were babies when it happened? Have you ever wondered where it all began and why we do this thing called baptism?

Baptism is not something that came out of Christianity. John and Jesus were not the first to introduce their communities to baptism. Baptisms had been around for centuries. Our Hebrew ancestors baptized often as a way of becoming clean after being defiled. In the book of Leviticus Moses washes Aaron and his sons before they can enter the temple. They had to be ritually clean before entering the house of God. In the First Testament you find law after law after law about all the things that defile you...things that make you unclean. Then you find all the ways to become cleansed and made new. One of these ways was the use of the Mikvah. Since the year 1919, archeologists have uncovered several Mikvah around Israel. Many were in people's homes, several by public buildings such as the temple. A Mikvah is a pool of sorts. The pool has two sets of steps and some of the water must come from a living source such as a river, a spring, the ocean...LIVING water. There were 7 steps leading into the Mivah which represent the 7 days of creation. The idea was to enter on one side as unclean. Then you would immerse yourself in the waters and then you leave the other side, clean, renewed, a part of a new creation, if you will. The law required a lot of cleansing. That's why this story is so important. Jesus comes along and suddenly to be baptized once is enough...with Christ comes baptism of the Holy Spirit and you are made a new creation through Christ and the need to continuously follow the old ways are no longer necessary. You leave a part of a new creation.

But what does it mean to become part of this new way, this new creation? It means our journeys of faith do not stop at the font. It means a lifetime of learning and growing and sharing and serving the God who so graciously serves you. Jesus spent his life learning. His real work began only after being baptized. He helped others become a part of the new way of living and loving...a part of the new creation found through following Christ. It was not an easy journey for him. Remember, Jesus was almost thrown off a cliff for preaching in his hometown. Jesus was constantly being questioned by the authorities. Jesus stood up for those on the fringes, those who deemed unworthy and unlovable. Jesus ate with the sinners and touched the unclean and gave of his gifts without hesitation. So today, on this day of remembering the baptism of our lord and savior, stop and think about your baptism. Ask yourself if you are living into your baptismal vows and loving our neighbors and our God with all we have? Stop and remember. Allow yourself to return to those waters, to allow your imagination to journey down to the river and immerse yourself in the Glory of God, knowing God calls you by name and calls you beloved. Amen.