

Did any of you wake up this morning with your first thought being, “How can I keep celebrating the birth of Christ?” Three years ago, when a mob rioted inside the U.S. Capitol just one week after Christmas, I wonder if the recent celebration of the birth of the Christ child was on their mind. Isn’t it interesting how quickly we can move from such a holy night to the thoughts, distractions, anxieties, and fears of daily life?

How can it be that we are still so close to Christmas and yet the joy and wonder of a baby in a manger is already fading away? The beginning of Mark’s Gospel invites us to remember why that moment is so important to every one of our moments.

We know so well that Luke began his Gospel with Gabriel telling Mary of her miracle baby and then the account of that birth with shepherds, angels, and a manger in Bethlehem. Mark, on the other hand, begins his proclamation of the Gospel on the bank of the Jordan River, that separates the desert from the fertile Promised Land.

Mark’s beginning reminds us of the Creation account in Genesis which began with nothing other than chaos and water. I believe Mark was inspired to see that connection and shares the awesome beginning of life that emerges as Jesus came splashing into the water where river and desert collide, for without water there can be no life!

The waters of the Jordan kept Israel alive. The waters of Mary’s womb carried Jesus into this life. And so, how appropriate for Mark to begin his Gospel with the image of water being the stage for this new beginning! For the Good News of Jesus is all about separating chaos from life. And the river Jordan did exactly that for Israel, serving as a border between wilderness and fertile pastures.

Daily we caught in the tension between chaos and order, between destruction and creation, just like water in Jesus’ day was the only thing that changed desert into fertile fields. The daily tug of war between life and death, faith and distraction, hope and fear, is the reality that Jesus came splashing into that new life might emerge.

John was a miracle baby too, remember? His ministry was to get everyone ready. He was certainly different and unique! Everyone wanted to see what he was up to, but he made sure they understood he was only the opening act. John gathered people in the river to prepare to meet Jesus! Then Jesus showed up and said, “I’ll take it from here!”

John had warmed up the crowd, but with Jesus on stage, it was time for lights, camera, action! The real drama was ready to begin. Then heavens opened (just like Luke’s account of Christmas angels) as the world was introduced to its king. In Mark’s account, rather than angel voices, it is the voice of God proclaiming, “My Son!” Just as his voice initiated creation with the words, “Let there be light!”

In another miraculous moment, God's word repeats the beginning of life in a perfect way! On Christmas we were Luke opened his Gospel with the image of a baby in a manger and angels in the sky. Matthew started his Gospel with wise men following a star. Mark, on the other hand began with fast paced action; he jumped right into an adult Jesus beginning his ministry, like a faith-filled leap off a diving board!

Luke emphasized a natural birth with angels singing and shepherds witnessing. Mark begins with waters of life, a voice from heaven, and crowds of witnesses gathered in front of the Messiah! For both, the result is the same; God's Word is living in our midst!

Genesis proclaimed God's entrance into time and space by destroying the chaos of darkness, and separated water from land. Then, from the dust of the earth, mixed with the moisture of God's breath, he created mankind. Never forget how Israel entered the Promised Land, leaving the desert and crossing through the River Jordan at this same spot. Mark shares Christ's entrance where river and desert collide!

And the same Word that said, "Let there be trees, stars, animals and people," was formed into flesh and appeared standing in Jordan, surrounded by the waters of life.

Jordan was the life of Israel. It separated civilization from wilderness. Standing in the Jordan, Jesus' audience had to recall how ancestors escaped Egypt through a water crossing and ended their lifetime in the desert with another water crossing through this same river in which he stood. Jesus proclaimed, "I am the new water crossing to freedom." I am the living water that will bring life out of chaos and escape from death. I am with you and will lead you out into a new life that has been promised since day one.

Now consider how John began his Gospel. The first account deals with Jesus turning water into wine! Doesn't Mark show the same miracle as Jesus uses a river to introduce real life? Everything Jesus touches changes just as God's word changed chaos into the universe and everything that is in it.

In the flesh of Jesus, God ties himself to all that my life is, was, and will become. Rather than just standing at a distance, shouting instructions, he climbs into the same life we live, saying "I am with you!" He doesn't just watch but embraces every moment of my life – every struggle – every blessing – every hope and every fear. He makes us one with him and he becomes one with us.

Jesus didn't get washed in the river to become good or holy. He wanted to stand in the place where people were prepared to receive him and affirm his tie to their lives. His ministry joyfully began in the place where river and desert collide! He is with us wherever we are and wherever we go.

Just as rivers turn desert into fertile land, Jesus would later reach out from the cross and, like living water, gather lonely and dying and outcasts and offer a brand-new life.

He stands with us in the same way today.

From the cross Jesus reached out in love. From the cross he showed us a new way to live, as we answer that same call to loving service. For Mark, this salvation story all began in the water. Rather than anointed with oil like a King to sit on a throne, Jesus climbed into our own bath water and splashes along with us in every step of our living. Jesus has undertaken the greatest desert reclamation project of all time.

John prepared people to be changed by the Messiah who jumped into the same world in which they lived. He called them out of the desert and pulled them into water, into life. And then Jesus joined them in the water, and all moved back to daily living knowing that life would never be the same again.

We live daily where river and desert collide. In Christmas we splashed in the water but already we are being dragged back into the desert. Remember our first question? Did any of you wake up this morning with your first thought being, "How can I keep celebrating the birth of Christ?" Why do we keep getting distracted by the desert?

Martin Luther said we should begin each day by making the sign of the cross, remembering our baptism, and living with that gift as the purpose and power for each moment ahead. We can be distracted by the desert, confused by earth's chaos, or celebrate the life that has changed us for now and forever.

Maybe if we begin each day in a similar way, we will never forget the amazement of Mary and Joseph, the song of the angels, the witness of the shepherds, a visit of strangers from a far-off land, or John standing with Jesus in the river.

The joy of such Good News can wash sleep from our eyes and bring joy to every moment of living. But first, we must remember!

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