

## Walking the Jordan River



Waters shall break forth in the wilderness... *Isaiah 35:1-10*

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.. *Psalms 46:1-12*

On either side of the river is the tree of life, with its 12 kinds of fruit...  
and the leaves of the fruit are for the healing of the nations... *Revelation 22:1-5*

Then Jesus came from the Galilee to the Jordan, to be baptized by John.... *Matthew 3:13-17*

The Jordan River winds through the whole Bible, a sacred symbol for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Jews remember that their ancestors crossed through the Jordan into the promised land. Christians remember that Jesus came there to be baptized in its waters. And Muslims remember Muhammad, whose closest companions were buried there.

In today's Gospel Jesus steps into the Jordan... not just to be baptized in a symbolic action, but to be drenched in the river's waters. Are **you** ready to step into the waters, too?

## Walking the River with Jesus

As a young boy, Jesus probably climbed into the mountains north of his home in Nazareth, perhaps even reaching the springs that feed the river near Mt. Hermon.



*Cascades near Mt. Hermon*

Jesus certainly would have seen farmers using the Jordan's water to irrigate their farms.



*The upper Jordan*

We know Jesus hiked around the Sea of Galilee, formed by the river's waters over many centuries.



*The Sea of Galilee*

And after his baptism, we know he climbed into the dry hills above the river, to wrestle with his call to ministry.



*The lower Jordan*

## Walking the river today



*The Jordan from outer space*

I invite you to walk the Jordan River with me this morning. We could choose to hike along the Colorado River, sacred to the Native Americans who live along its banks, dammed by American engineers, diverted to American farms before it reaches Mexican land. Or we could walk along the Ganges as it rushes through India and Bangladesh, or along the Nile as it moves through the nations of North Africa.

We could be walking almost any river on Earth, because every river has ecological, human, and spiritual value to the people who live nearby; but we're walking the Jordan today because it already has spiritual value for us, and it is crying out for practical solutions to its many problems.

For a river with such mighty meaning, the Jordan River is very short – only 156 miles long. It was once more than 75 feet wide, flanked by willow trees and poplars and filled with fish that could be eaten. Today at its best, the Jordan is less than 6 feet deep, more like a creek than a river.

The river flows through some of the most dangerous and disputed land on Earth. Its sources begin in the mountains where the borders of Lebanon, Syria, and Israel meet. Below the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan forms the border between Israel and two Arab nations. But the crisis facing the river Jordan involves more than international politics. Today environmentalists blame Israel, Jordan and Syria for crippling damage to the river and its ecosystem. 70% to 90% of the river's waters are used for human purposes along the upper Jordan, and the remaining water comes from sewage and the contaminated agricultural run-off.



*Yardenit*

Just below the Sea of Galilee, the modern pilgrim comes to Yardenit... where the Jordan's waters form a pool of clean water. More than 600,000 pilgrims come here every year. Many come to be baptized, or to be re-baptized) in the waters. If you only saw the Jordan here (as most Christian pilgrims do) you might think that the Jordan River is still robust and vibrant.



*Alumot*

Just a few miles south of Yardenit, we come to the Alumot Dam... which diverts the fresh water into Israel's national water carrier. A small sewage treatment plant processes the rest, producing brownish-yellow sewage water. As the river continues south, the sewage from thousands of Israelis living in the upper Jordan Valley; from thousands of Israeli settlers and Palestinians on the West Bank; and from a quarter-million Jordanians provides the Lower Jordan River with most of its water.



*The Island of Peace*

A few miles south of Alumot, we come to the "Island of Peace". To find an Island of Peace anywhere in the world is rare, but to find it in the Middle East is a miracle. The land here is Jordanian, but it's owned and farmed by an Israeli kibbutz. 100 years ago, kibbutz leaders received permission from Jordan to build a hydroelectric power station, and the canals and dams built for the station created an island.

In the Israeli-Arab War of 1967, Israel captured the Island of Peace along with other land in Jordan. We know that conflict has continued in the region since that war; but 25 years ago Israel ceded the area back to Jordan. Jordan agreed to lease it back to the Israeli farmers, so they could continue to cultivate the land.

The kibbutz on the Island of Peace continues to this day; international pilgrims still visit; and Friends of the Earth – Middle East (now called EcoPeace) hopes to create a "Jordan Peace Park" someday people from the region – and from all nationalities – can come to talk and work together for environmental peace.



*Bethany beyond the Jordan*

A few miles south of the “Island of Peace” we come to *al-Maghtas* – “the baptism site”. This is the traditional site of Jesus’ baptism – honored and visited for nearly 2,000 years of Christian history. Today pilgrims walk down steps that led to a deck on the river's edge, and – if they dare – can step into the Jordan’s waters.

Two years ago EcoPeace, an environmental organization, led journalists on a tour of the river. One of the journalists recorded, “One look at the river and we understood why we came on the trip. It was pitiful. The Jordan River, for all its fame, was a narrow brownish stream that gurgled its way south. On the opposite side, just a few meters away from us in Jordan, was a similar wooden deck where tourists came and went. One pilgrim put on a white cloth and calmly entered the water. The guide, who had been explaining how the river turned from gushing rapids into a fetid stream, stopped mid-sentence as we all watched in horror.”

There are times when our beliefs can blind us to the reality right before our eyes!



*The Dead Sea*

A few more miles, and we come to the Dead Sea. The Jordan always ended in the Dead Sea, which has no outlet because it’s so far below sea level. But now the Dead Sea is truly dying, shrinking by the day as its waters are drained away for human use.

### **And don’t forget the refugees**

The Jordan River might be described as the latest victim in the Syrian civil war. More than 3 million refugees have fled Syria to date, and over half a million have settled in arid and water-impooverished Jordan. Environmental issues have understandably been a very distant second to humanitarian concerns, but the ongoing chaos and fast-increasing mass of refugees needing water have reduced the river’s flow to a trickle.



*Za'atari Refugee Camp*

One of the Jordan's tributaries, the Yarmouk River, flows southwest out of Syria and forms the border between Syria, Jordan and Israel. Nearby is the Za'atari Refugee Camp, the second largest refugee camp in the world and now the fourth largest settlement in Jordan. (To illustrate the impact that humans have on these rivers, note this: As refugees fled southern Syria, the amount of water flowing in the Yarmouk water greatly increased – because the water is no longer being used in farms and towns.)

### **What EcoPeace is doing about the Jordan**

EcoPeace Middle East (formerly known as Friends of the Earth Middle East) is an organization active in environmental peacemaking. With 40 paid employees and hundreds of volunteers, EcoPeace publishes scientific and social research, spearheads national-level advocacy campaigns and engages in grassroots community development.

One of EcoPeace's major goals is the rehabilitation of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. It has made surprising headway in encouraging cooperation in order to save the river. A major program, the *Good Water Neighbors* project, engages residents of all ages, mayors and municipal representatives in 25 communities throughout all three countries in a united effort to rehabilitate the regions' shared water resources.

One of EcoPeace's studies shows that the Jordan River could return to life with 400 million cubic meters of fresh water annually. Where would the water come from? Half would be returned by Israel, a quarter by Jordan, and the last quarter by Syria.

Impossible? The work EcoPeace has done with local councils and the media has created a public outcry which in turn has convinced the local authorities near the Sea of Galilee to finally build a sewage treatment plant, which will treat the waste and then use that water for other purposes.

A proposed Jordan River Peace Park is a source of particular hope to EcoPeace backers. They envision an island national park where Jordanians, Israelis, and Palestinians, who so seldom meet, might congregate and try to overcome their differences.

### **What are we going to do?**

This has been another week when we've felt defeated by American politics, alarmed by world leaders threatening war, and overwhelmed by monster hurricanes and earthquakes. Can we muster any energy to save earth's waters?

Every worth-while task is daunting. It doesn't matter whether you want to save the salmon in the Columbia River or the Morro Bay Estuary, share water equitably from the Colorado or the San Joaquin delta. It doesn't matter whether your issue starts with underground water in Cambria or Paso Robles, or the with the cost of treating sewage in Los Osos.

If Israelis and Jordanians can maintain an Island of Peace in a region of war, what could we do here?

I know that everyone here this morning is already personally doing something to care for the environment. We've learned to recycle, take shorter showers, stop using Styrofoam cups and plastic bottles – small personal actions that mount up when we do it together. But how are we working together to pressure our local officials, our national leaders, to make better decisions about water?

If some brave Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians can cooperate to save the Jordan River, can't *we* muster the patience to deal with our own neighbors, with our community service districts, with our county, state and national leaders?

How big a task is too big for us? Let's return to Psalm 46:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved,  
though the mountains be toppled into the depths of the sea.  
The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold.

As I see it, there are two ways to hear what this psalm is saying.

We could hear it saying, *Don't worry, leave it to God.*  
Or we could hear it saying, *God will give you strength to do the work before you.*

What do *you* hear?

Every worth-while task is daunting, but that doesn't mean it can't be done.



*The Mud Creek Slide*

Yesterday when Rob read this verse – *the mountains toppled into the depths of the sea* – he was reminded of the great slide on Highway One north of us – and the mind-boggling challenge of repairing it.

So Rob asked, should we wait for God to fix this – these *mountains that have tumbled into the sea* – or can God give us strength – the strength to decide to fix our infrastructure, to repair our roads and our dams, and then agree to pay taxes so the state of California can fix it?

Rob says that's one thing he can do.

What's *your* "one thing"?