

FROM WHERE IS OUR HOPE TO COME

Today, most all mainline Christian churches will hear the story of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River. One thing I like about the story is that Jesus was baptized "*with all the people.*" His public baptism was an act of solidarity with all of us. This is particularly apparent in Luke's version when Jesus simply gets in line with those who were turning to God and coming to the waters of baptism with hopes for a new beginning and a new life.

Whenever we witness a baptism, we are encouraged to remember our own. The same is true today as we witness the Baptism of Jesus through the telling of Mark's Gospel.

Being baptized as an adult, I came to those waters later than some. I still remember the night that remains as one of the most important of my life. It was March 25, 1989. I was thirty-four years old and I, along with a small group of my fellow catechumens, were being baptized at the Great Vigil of Easter at the Catholic parish of Saint Francis of Assisi in Sacramento. That evening, I felt that an important new journey had begun. What I did not realize was just how profoundly my life changed on that Holy Vigil night. It was only in the years that followed that I would come to embrace the fullness of what it means to live into a baptismal life, and the experience continues to unfold for me even today.

I think that is often how it is for many of us. We make a decision, we bring ourselves, imperfect and as unknowing as we may be, and then the process of the unfolding realization of God's purpose for us begins to take shape.

Seventeen years ago, I made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and visited the Jordan River where John baptized Jesus. I remembered that Easter Vigil night so many years ago at Saint Francis. I thought of how I had come to baptism for healing as a way to turn my life around, turning toward God the only way I knew how. At the time I did not fully realize what it would all mean for me. But God knew, and that's all that mattered. As I dipped my head into the River Jordan, I remembered that I have been marked as Christ's own forever and sealed by the Holy Spirit and I renewed my desire to keep up my end of the deal. I sometimes stumble, but I do my best, and I know that is good enough for God.

For me, baptism means three things. First, we are given a fresh start – a new canvass onto which we can create or recreate our lives. Secondly, we are gathered into a community of others like us. We become Christian members of God's global family of all faiths and traditions. Thirdly, baptism comes with work to do.

In the Episcopal tradition, we make a covenant with God that we will proclaim the good news of God in Christ, seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves; strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. *All persons, all people, and every human being* means everybody, period. No exceptions, regardless of denominational stripes, political affiliation, religious tradition, skin color, rich, poor, or how we express love. Everybody means everybody.

This call to solidarity carries critical importance in this time of the horrors of violence, bloodshed, and death that is occurring in Gaza and Israel. As of Friday, the death tolls stands at 22, 925 Palestinians and 1,139 people in Israel killed since October 6. In addition, 58,000 Palestinians have been injured along with 8,730 in Israel. Of the nearly 23,000 Palestinians killed, over 9,600 are children, and nearly 7,000 are women. That means that 72% of those killed are innocent children and women. This is more than war. This is something different.

Today, the waters are troubled, and the Holy Lands are trembling with violence and bloodshed like never before. In the two hours or so that we will gather here this morning, more than 80 bombs will fall on Gaza. 30 more people will be killed. 12 of those will be children.

I heard an Islamic Imam once say that "God does not belong to any one religion. We all belong to God." Each of us may come from different traditions, cultures, and ways of understanding God, but we are all God's people. I pray that we will all realize the Divine Light of Love that is within us, and that we would all know that we are beloved by God, not because we were consecrated in any particular faith, but simply because we were born.

I am not sure what each of us can do to stop the atrocities happening in Gaza. I sometimes feel powerless. But I do have faith that if we can all turn to God as we understand God and allow room in our hearts for the Divine power of God's love, there will be an answer. I pray that we can somehow try peace as a starting point, because we have never really given peace a chance.

Oh Divine, it is sometimes hard for us to imagine peace when there is so much war; hard to feel hope when we see so much despair. It's hard to imagine how we can find redemption from the pain we see around us and around the world. We need your spirit to breathe into our imaginations.

For so many, justice seems far away.
For the world, peace seems improbable.
Hope seems a faint flicker.

And yet, we get glimpses -
Glimpses of kindness,
Glimpses of reconciliation,
Glimpses of swords being turned into plowshares.
Each glimpse whispers to us that your word of grace is the final one.

Feed our souls your hope, Jesus.
You who came from these holy lands and was baptized in the waters of the Jordan.
Because we need your light of peace
And hope that the future belongs to all of us.
Amen.

Brother Dennis