

Over thirty years ago, when Ivy and I lived in suburban Philadelphia, I was helping teach a seventh grade confirmation class. We had the kids read sections of the Gospel of Mark and then tell it in their own words. When it was Jeremy's turn he started with, "Well, there was this guy named John roaming around in the woods." In the woods? I had a sudden image of The Last of the Mohicans. Clearly the only wilderness my kids could envision was dense forest. I corrected him to see the story set in a desert.

But I have to say that after the group of us from St. John's took a trip to Israel two years ago, I had to deepen my own image of John the Baptist. The Jordan River south of Jerusalem cuts its way through the surrounding desert; a desert of barren rock eroded into rolling peaks, rifts and caves, where the sun beats down without mercy. It is an empty, unrelieved landscape. Nowadays, this bleak picture is intensified by the barbed wire fencing of the Israeli military along the dusty road to the river, a kind of reminder that in the time of Jesus the country was also under military occupation.

From a parking lot there is a sloping walkway down to the Jordan, and at the river's edge we sat down to take off our shoes and socks. Carefully using my walking stick, I ventured into the current until the water was well above my knees and then just stood there feeling the river bottom under my feet, the rush of water against my legs, the heat of the sun.

If I had totally dunked myself in the river, folks would probably have thought I had slipped and was in need of rescue. So instead I took off my cotton sun hat and repeatedly filled it with water, pouring it over my head again and again, my own free-form remembering of my baptism. For the people who came to be baptized by John in the first century CE, this desert, this river would have been their experience as well. But most of them had

walked nearly eighty miles to get there – no tour buses or paved walkways.

In this scene at the Jordan, Mark is beginning his Gospel account with constant, driving urgency, a straight-ahead story with little unnecessary detail. He repeatedly writes that events follow one after the other “immediately”. Our translation says that Jesus experienced God’s presence ‘just as’ he was coming up from the waters of the river. But the Greek word used here is *amesos*: ‘immediately’. It is as though God won’t wait one more minute before breaking through to join heaven to earth, coming completely close to us.

In the same way, it is very easy to read through this passage barely noticing that the heavens are not opened quietly by the descending dove but are ‘torn apart’. It is a violent word, as though God doesn’t float gently down, but explodes into the heart of Jesus’ life - filling him with his name of beloved Son, confirming him in his choice of obedient love, and setting him on the journey toward the cross.

Perhaps we’ve lost much of Mark’s sense of the urgency and ultimacy of the news about Jesus. Our rite of baptism, based in John’s actions but filtered through into the church’s liturgy, can seem to be largely about loving parents and cute babies, whom we try not to get too wet. It’s as though we are saying, “Don’t worry, nothing dangerous or unusual is happening here.”

But then I think of Annie Dillard’s words about our life in the church:

Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or... does no one believe a word of it? The churches are like children playing on the floor

with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to pass a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' flowered straw hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return."

Mark's telling of the baptism of Jesus is trying to jolt us out of complacency about God's coming to us in a Son. In our jittery, glittering, preoccupied world, it can be easy to miss the fact that all of the Gospel is rushing toward us in this and every moment. The cyclone wind of the Spirit is trying to blow away the dead ashes covering the embers of our faith, trying to lift us to God's claim on us – a claim that asks merely everything.

They tell of an old Baptist preacher from a tiny Appalachian mountain town, who led his flock down to the river for baptism. It was Spring and the stream near the little chapel was not a gentle trickle but a raging torrent. Not at all daunted, the pastor waded into the waters and called the first candidate to him. The young man carefully made his way to the extended hand of his elder. But as soon as he was dunked in the river, he lost his footing on the slippery rocks, and was carried downstream by the tumbling waters, lost to all efforts to retrieve him. Immediately the preacher called out loudly, "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Send in the next one."

Sure, that story is apocryphal. But what if it is telling us that we cannot be complacent about baptism which is not exactly tame or safe? Oh, not many people will be drowned in the Episcopal liturgy. But this is a sacrament about life and death.

As the Apostle Paul proclaims, we are baptized into the death of Christ, so that like him we may rise to new life.

So in our worship this morning, we remember our baptismal vows, as Lynnea comes to know them for herself. We join with her and her sponsors in speaking the words of our most ancient creed. And perhaps rather than just reciting the familiar phrases, we could let the words of belief and promise come to real life in us. They might just carry us into the presence of God, where we can be called, named, claimed and sent as Jesus was.

For we, too, are beloved sons and daughters of God, welcoming the newest member of the beloved community. Then together this gathered group of ordinary baptized people can join in walking down the unpredictable, uncontrollable road toward the Kingdom of astonishing joy.