

33rd Sunday Ordinary Time, 2019
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
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We couldn't wait to get there. We were on our way through the desert to see the very spot where Jesus had been baptized.

I've been reading the Gospel story of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River since I was a boy.

And now... I was going to stand in the actual place where Jesus and John the Baptizer encountered each other. I was going to pray in that place where Jesus heard God the Father say: "You are my beloved child... with you I am well pleased."

We were driving through the desert, in the border valley between Israel and Jordan.

Our bus turned off of the highway to a smaller road. There were fences on either side of the bus. I wondered *why* there were fences in the middle of nowhere!

Then I noticed that there were yellow signs on the fence. And the signs said, "Danger. Keep Out. Land mines!"

Now it made sense to me. This whole valley has been fought over in modern times by the Jordanians and Israelis. Both sides have controlled the land at various times. And they have filled this desert valley with land mines.

We got to the Jordan River. It was a very moving experience... to know that Jesus' public ministry started right here, when he came up out of the water, baptized for his mission.

Eventually we got back on the bus. Then I saw the yellow signs again: "Danger. Keep Out."

And I thought to myself – how ironic. In order to get to the place of Jesus' baptism, you have to be surrounded by danger. And as you leave this holy place, you once again are surrounded by danger.

Then it dawned on me... that's precisely the experience that Jesus had... and it's the experience that you and I have, each in our own way.

Think about it: Jesus went out into the desert to be baptized by John. His friends were with him. The holy moment of baptism happened. And Jesus had the powerful experience, when the voice

of God said to him, “I love you.”

What a great place to be in your life! Surrounded by friends. Knowing for certain that God loves you!

Wouldn't you want to STAY in such a wonderful, comforting place?

But Jesus is *not* allowed to stay there, all wet and secure. From that moment on, as Jesus begins his public ministry of proclaiming God's word, Jesus experiences conflict, resistance, danger.

He brings about healings through the power of the Holy Spirit – which puts him in conflict with the evil spirits which trap and imprison people in sickness and isolation.

He reveals God's love for all people – which puts him in conflict with religious leaders who want to somehow reserve God's mercy for those who have been judged worth.

He proclaims the kingdom of God - which brings his ultimately to Jerusalem, to the Cross. The ministry he started at his baptism ultimately costs him his life. And through that crucifixion, he reveals the gift of eternal life for all who are baptized.

Jesus does not face landmines, but he does face dangers, struggles, challenges. He who was baptized and beloved.

We, too, are baptized and beloved.

God whispered words of love to Jesus when he was baptized. That same message is whispered into our ears when *we* are baptized. We are *reminded* of that promise and calling every time we see *another* human being baptized.

Baptism days are wonderful days. Family members gather together. Sacraments are celebrated. Parties happen. The child is surrounded by love – both human and divine.

But then, if you will, we have to ‘get back on the bus.’ We are baptized to *live* the Christian life in a *world* that is full of challenges, conflicts, difficulties, and even dangers.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus is honest with his first disciples – and with all of us. He tells us that following him is going to be hard at times. He tells us that there will be conflicts. As we strive to live the Gospel and stay faithful to it, we will experience push-back, confusion, division, opposition.

In a world that loves lies, those who are committed to Gospel truth should expect opposition.
In a world that love anger, those who are committed to Gospel peace should expect opposition.
In a world that luxuriates in consumption, those who are committed to simplicity and generosity should expect opposition.

In a culture which constantly thinks that the death of someone else will solve our problems, those who stand for the dignity and value of every human life should expect opposition.

The other day, Pope Francis denounced what he called a “culture of waste and hatred,” a culture in which people are given permission to hate Jewish people, immigrant people, gay and lesbian people. Guess what the Pope is facing now on right-wing blogs – resistance and hatred!

There are harsh realities in our world. And every parent wishes that they could permanently protect their children from life’s harsh realities; the heartbreaks and struggles.

But parents know that they can’t. So instead, parents try to *prepare* their children for life’s challenges, by *teaching* their children what is important, by instilling *discipline*, and helping their children to know that they are *loved*.

God does this at every moment of our lives! God has important work for us today. Just watch the news – you know that there is Gospel work that must be done.

And, whether it is far from here, or close to home, the world will only be changed *for the better* if every follower of Jesus gets serious about Jesus’ Gospel. We are called to live our lives according to Jesus’ example.

And you don’t need a yellow sign on a fence to tell you that *living* the Gospel in the modern world will be *hard* work, and lead to difficulties. It may even be dangerous.

The Lord knows that already. So the Lord gives us what we need in the sacraments. He knows that we need wisdom and strength – so Christ gives us his Holy Spirit in the Sacraments. His Spirit, his very life, alive in us.

The Lord knows that we need generosity and courage – so Christ connects our hearts to his in baptism and the eucharist. His heart, beating and loving in us.

The Lord knows that we need encouragement, each day, to try to live the Gospel in a tough world. So he says to us in baptism: “You are my beloved child. With you I am pleased.” He says it in baptism. He says it when you wake up. He says it every time you breathe.

And when we are discouraged, or confused, or worried, or facing what seems to be an insurmountable task... when we are hungry for good news, the Lord calls us back together, in this community of discipleship and service.

And here, he teaches us through his Word, and nourishes us with his Body and Blood.

Today, Christian *children* are baptized. With Christ's help, you and I can teach them what it looks like to live an *adult* Christian life, in a very real world.

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