

March 10, 2019
Irving Park Lutheran Church
Sermon Preached by Seminary Student Bristol Reading on Luke 4:1-13

A Geographic and Spiritual Journey

In the Gospel story we just heard, about the temptation of Jesus, he takes both a geographic journey and a spiritual one. Jesus has come *from* the Jordan River, where he was just baptized, then journeyed *out into* the mountainous Judean wilderness where he spends weeks alone, driven to near madness by his hunger and thirst, while facing down his demons, so to speak.

I do not think it is by accident that these two events happen in these two places: Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River followed by Jesus' temptation in the Judean wilderness. The physical places almost seem to represent the spiritual experiences Jesus has.

I have taken a journey similar to that of Jesus... the geographic one I mean. As many of you know, I went to the Holy Land for two weeks in January with a group of seminarians, teachers, and alumni from the LSTC, where I am a student. We went to Jordan, Israel, and Palestine.

We spent a few days in the kingdom of Jordan, which shares a border with Israel. That border is the Jordan River, whose water is shared by both nations, despite their history of conflict. When we crossed the border from Jordan to Israel, we crossed the river near the place where Jesus was baptized. Today, it is a heavily guarded Christian holy site, and many pilgrims travel great distances to wade in the water in which Jesus also waded.

Unfortunately, in the arid climate of the Middle East, the growing populations of Israel and Jordan and the rising tide of refugees to the area, have put increasing pressure on the Jordan's water supply, which has been so overdrawn that the river has been reduced to a muddy trickle. Nearly 95% of its historic flow has been diverted to provide for the needs of the surrounding population. The water is actually hard to see from the bridge above it; it hides down among the shrubs and grasses as it winds its way southward toward the Dead Sea.

As our tour bus crossed over this place of Jesus' baptism, I thought of the many ways that the river has changed –
in Jesus' day, this would have been a mighty, flowing river, *not* a tense militarized border.

Yet, I was reminded of the other ways in which the river has *not* changed. Water, despite human attempts to control it, is borderless. Even when the river itself *is* a border, its water continues moving, eventually evaporating, re-condensing, and raining down somewhere new – returning again and again to the thirsty earth.

The water on our planet now is the *same water* that has been on our planet for thousands and thousands of years. They say you can never step in the same river twice, but, in a way, the Jordan River *is* flowing with the *same water* in which Jesus was baptized so many years ago, fed by the *same waters* of the Sea of Galilee in which Jesus fished with his disciples, and upon which Jesus walked through the storm.

When I visited the Jordan River – I was *struck* by the *power* of this *same* water.

I grieved its diminishment *and* I was grateful for its enduring holiness.

Immediately after we crossed the border at the Jordan, we drove a few miles west to the mountain where tradition says Jesus had his showdown with Satan. The place is called “Temptation Mountain,” after this Gospel story about Jesus being tempted by the devil. The mountains in this part of Israel are bulky cliffs of limestone and reddish clay. They glow with beautiful warm colors at sunrise and sunset, and they are – still – an arid, foreboding wilderness.

Our journey diverges from that of Jesus a bit at this point: we didn’t spent 40 days in the Judean wilderness; only two. And, ironically enough in light of this story of Jesus’ extreme thirst and hunger, we actually went to the base of Temptation Mountain specifically to have lunch. Visitors can take cable cars from there up into the barren hills, imagining what Jesus might have seen during those 40 days of fasting...

but our group just had lunch at the little resort nestled at the base of the mountains, with the tourist shops, all-you-can-eat hummus and falafel, and tiled fountains. The whole place was – I am not kidding you – overrun by wild peacocks. Thanks to underground springs nearby, this place is the *epitome* of a desert oasis. It must have been quite a shock for Jesus to leave here and go out into those desolate mountains.

But, like the Jordan River, Temptation Mountain has a complicated relationship with the political landscape around it. It is on the edge of Jericho, which today sits in the region called the West Bank, a patchwork of contested cities and neighborhoods. Jericho is a Palestinian city. The owners of the shops and restaurants at Temptation Mountain are Palestinians. Although they spoke to us in English, they spoke to each other in Arabic.

The difference of language between Arabic and Hebrew is one way to determine when you are in a Palestinian area of the West Bank rather than an Israeli area – the *water* is another way. Like the Jordanians and Israelis who share the water of the Jordan River, their Palestinian neighbors are also dependent on the same limited supply of fresh water that flows down from Galilee. But, unlike the Jordanians and Israelis, Palestinians do not have consistent or sufficient access to water. Buildings in Palestinian neighborhoods have easily spotted reserve tanks on their roofs to store back-up water for the frequent occurrences when the tap water is shut off.

In this dry land, the water is life.

And when the rains do not come and the river runs dry, that water gets harder and harder to share. Whoever has control of the water seems to have control of life itself. But the water is not for humans to control, is it?

This is what Jesus attests to when he resists Satan’s offer on the top of Temptation Mountain. Looking out over the land – the limestone mountains, the palm trees and springs of Jericho, the Jordan River in the distance – Satan says to Jesus, “If you worship me, all this will be yours.”

But Jesus *knows* that this land is *not* Satan’s to give. The land, the trees, the rocks, the *water* ... they belong to the God who created them. Jesus rejects the temptation to control this landscape. He holds fast to the truth of scripture and his identity.

Surely this was not easy for him. Facing these temptations is not a quick or painless process. Jesus does not simply go out to the Judean wilderness – where there is no rain, where there is no water – he *stays* there. He lingers there for weeks confronting these temptations... for comfort, for power, for glory.

And when Jesus finally leaves Temptation Mountain, surely he has been *changed* by this experience, by these weeks of fasting and struggling. This lonely desert time may have felt to him like it would last *forever*...

But it didn't last forever. Jesus leaves the wilderness a man on a mission, *filled* once again with the Holy Spirit. This desert season is only the *beginning* of his powerful, transforming ministry that will change so many lives and alter the course of human history. Jesus' journey, geographic *and* spiritual, did *not* end at Temptation Mountain.

Jesus' journey did *not* end in the desert. And neither does ours. We, too, are at the beginning of a journey, the journey of Lent, that may feel like a desert season that will last forever. But it won't last forever.

Lent was envisioned in the early Christian church as a season of preparation for those seeking to be baptized at Easter. But later the church realized that, though we are baptized only once, the journey of returning to the waters of our baptism is one we do over and over again. In fact Martin Luther wrote that the whole "Christian life is nothing else than a *daily* baptism, begun once and *continuing* ever after."¹

In a way, during Lent, we are all pilgrims journeying back to the water. In the desert seasons of our lives, we can be reminded again and again that we are indelibly marked by water. Although the deserts may seem like they have the final say in our lives, God's abundant waters *will* flow again.

In the Holy Land, there are many people who are working to restore and protect the waters of the Jordan River in which Jesus was baptized that *they* might flow again. There are many people who are working negotiate equitable distribution of fresh water to *all* people living in the region: Jordanians, Israelis, Palestinians, Syrians. There are many people who believe in the promise of abundance even in a place and time of dryness.

I met some of them when I retraced Jesus' journey from the river to the wilderness. I asked one of them, a hydrologist who works for the protection of these precious waterways, what he wanted American Christians to know about the water situation in the Holy Land. He told me to share about the *power* of the water, depended on by so many, to bring *peace*.

Because the water in the Holy Land *is* life. It is needed by *all* the people. All the people are responsible for coming together to care for it.

During this Lenten season, as we journey yet again back to our baptisms, we are reminded of how deeply *we, too*, need the water. The desert is not the end. The water that comes from and belongs to our creator is borderless and abundant, meant for *all* time, for *all* people.

¹ Large Catechism, IV.65, 465. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).