

As I was reading through the first chapter of John to gain the context for John's version of Jesus' baptism, I came across an intriguing difference in opinion regarding the place where John baptized Jesus. That statement comes in the sentence preceding what Leslie read. That version joins many in saying that the place was called "Bethany across the Jordan."

I knew of the Bethany outside the walls of Jerusalem, which is the home of Jesus' friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. However, when I looked up the location in my online concordance, I found a different name, "Bethabara." "These are not the same words," I thought. "Why the difference?" I was curious about their meanings because often place names are significant to the context of the story. I remembered enough of my biblical Hebrew to know that the prefix "Beth" means "House." So, each of these was the "House of *something*."

Bethany, I was reminded, means "House of Figs." That could connect to later in the chapter when Jesus identifies the soon-to-be-disciple Nathaniel whom he had seen "under the fig tree." But that seemed like a stretch.

It was the early church ancestor, Origen, who called the place Bethabara when he could find no evidence of a Bethany along the Jordan where Jesus was purported to be baptized.

That spot was commonly used as a place to cross the river. Thus, *Bethabara* means “House of the ford.” (This is not to be confused with the place that Jacob called *Beth-El* meaning, “House of the Lord.”) “House of the Ford” makes so much more sense, as this spot on the east side of the Jordan is directly across from the ancient city of Jericho, which you should recall, is where Joshua led the Israelites into the Promised Land at the conclusion of The Exodus. That place marks the spot of NEW LIFE.

As John, the Gospel writer, opens the narrative, and sets up what God is doing for the world through Jesus, we can see that newness of life is afoot beginning with *this* baptism in *that* holy locale.

The manner in which John describes Jesus’ baptism is intriguing. In last week’s rendition, it was as if we were sitting on the banks of the river watching the scene unfold. Jesus comes before John, John tells him that he shouldn’t be baptizing Jesus, Jesus responding that it is right for them to be there. John baptizes Jesus, and as he comes out of the water, the Holy Spirit alights upon Jesus like a dove and a voice is heard claiming that Jesus is God’s beloved child in whom God is pleased.

Well, in John’s gospel, we get none of that objective observer perspective. Instead, the whole event is from the Baptizer’s

perspective. When Jesus walks near John, the Baptizer shares with someone (“Dear Reader”) *his experience* of the baptism. In fact it is his whole testimony that it was by the voice of God that he gained a deep understanding that Jesus was the real deal :

32 And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 33 I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ 34 And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Chosen One.”

What a relief that must have been for John; that occasion when Jesus showed up! John was sure that God had given him a special purpose. As we’ve talked about often, life was pretty bleak at that time. The Roman Empire had fully ensconced itself in Israel and Judah, and the religious establishment hadn’t pushed back against it. Like many leaders in our own time, the Pharisees and Saducees were so afraid of being subject to the wrath of the dictators, that they kowtowed to them. You recall Matthew calling them a “brood of snakes” when they came out to the wilderness to observe the scene of John’s baptisms. So, there wasn’t a lot of hope. John had been waiting and waiting.

What happens from the Baptizer's perspective echoes the first few lines of Psalm 40.

1 I waited patiently for the LORD;

he inclined to me and heard my cry.

2 He drew me up from the desolate pit,

out of the miry bog,

and set my feet upon a rock,

making my steps secure.

3 He put a new song in my mouth,

a song of praise to our God.

Many will see and fear

and put their trust in the Lord.

4 Happy are those who make

the Lord their trust,

who do not turn to the proud,

to those who go astray after false gods.

5 You have multiplied, O LORD my God,

your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us;

none can compare with you.

Were I to proclaim and tell of them,

they would be more than can be counted.

In Jesus, John sees a way out of the miry bog, the desolate pit that is the current state and fate of his generation of Israelites. And John is bold to challenge people to “see (who Jesus is) and (once again) fear / and put their trust in the Lord.”

John begins with two of his own disciples. Pointing at Jesus, he says, “Look, here is the Lamb of God (who takes away the sin of the world).” These disciples of John take notice, and follow Jesus.

{Now, before I go on with the rest of the narrative, I want us to notice that this will be it for the character of John. John has done his very important work. Through *his experience* with Jesus, he has identified Jesus as the promised Christ. And he has shared his testimony with others, entrusting that the Holy Spirit-in-Jesus will be revealed to them. And then John leaves the scene. John has sung his new song, and trusts it will catch on with others.}

And it does... The gospel writer’s timing is wonderful. Like the building of the origin of the world in Genesis day-by-day, John builds this world with “The Lamb of God.” On one day, John baptizes Jesus. The next day he identifies Jesus as the Chosen One, allowing the world to take that in for the cycle of a day. Then on the next day, the Baptizer points out Jesus to two of his disciples. Let’s hear it again:

35 The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, 36 and as he watched Jesus walk by he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” 37 The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. 38 When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” 39 He said to them, “Come and see.”

The Greek word for their inquiry “Where are you staying?” is *Meno*. The gospel writer uses this word several times in this section with a variety of meanings:

- 32 And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 33 I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’
- 38 When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” 39 He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day.

Any questions we have about the presence of God dwelling with humanity is put to rest. The Spirit—like a dove—descended onto Jesus. And it REMAINED there! The disciples want to know where Jesus is going to dwell. “Come and see,” Jesus says to them. They did, and they remained with him from then on. And in that sentence, we are given the whole reason for the gospels. They are opportunities, from four perspectives, to watch as the disciples follow and see all that Jesus does.

As John’s gospel develops, it’s not just the disciples. There will be people at a wedding feast who see Jesus perform a miracle – a religious leader named Nicodemus will come to Jesus in the cover of night hoping to “see” better – Jesus encounters a woman at a well and she not only discovers that Jesus is the source of living water deeper and more satisfying than any well, she encourages her whole village to “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!” Then she asks the rhetorical question we are all left to wrestle with, “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” (4:29)

On and on it goes. I did this funny little series of gestures for Colleen in the office when we were discussing the text. Let’s go back to the story of the Baptizer who says he saw the Spirit rest on Jesus like a dove. *(I wiggle my fingers over my head)*

Then John introduces two of his disciples to Jesus and they abide and see. And the Spirit resides with them. *{more finger wiggling}* They

gather more disciples of Jesus when they share *their testimony* with friends. And as each connects with Jesus, the Holy Spirit rests on them, and they share their experience with others – many of whom “see” will believe, and find the Spirit resting upon them. We find the climax at The Resurrection (the New Exodus!) and the disciples carry that Word out into the world.

Then it moves beyond that first generation group; most notably to a zealous and violent Jew named Saul. After a period of horrific persecutions, this Saul is knocked off his horse, blinded and has an experience during which the Voice of Jesus asks him why Saul is persecuting Jesus. Concurrently, the Spirit of Jesus speaks to a disciple named Ananias who instructs him to take Saul in and nurse him back to health – a job Ananias would prefer not to do with such a despicable character as Saul. But he follows the call, and becomes part of the conversion of Saul to Paul, who then carried the Word about “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” to its farthest reaches; including to the people of Corinth to whom Paul shared his gratitude for having received the gospel. It is to them that Paul wrote:

4 I give thanks to God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, 5 for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind ... 9 God is faithful, by whom you were called into the partnership of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Cor 1)

A whole new song reaching the ears of those who wish to be lifted up from the miry bogs of their own lives, joining with others in communion to be a blessing to the world.

It's a fascinating vision of the transference of the Holy Spirit that has found its way through time all the way to us. We, too, are invited to "Come and See." We, too, are invited by the Lord of Life to abide with us. We, too, are encouraged to share with others just what a gift it is to be part of this communion. We, too, have our own new song to sing unto the world, so that "many (in our own time) will see and (believe) / and put their trust in Almighty God!