

Journey from Nazareth to the River Jordan (Retreat part 17)

The part of Jesus' life we focus on this week is his journey from home into his mission. At some point, perhaps around the age of thirty, Jesus leaves Nazareth and goes down to the river Jordan, where John is baptizing. He enters the water and, against John's reluctance, asks to be baptized along with everyone else. The heavens open and we hear God's affirmation of him.

The material that follows will assist in getting started with this contemplation. All week we want to walk around in this scene in our everyday life. As we imagine Jesus leaving that little house in Nazareth, we have so many questions to ask. Why did he leave? What process of reflection, of freedom, led him to go? Can we imagine the farewells? What did people say to him? What did he say to friends, to relatives, to Mary? As he walks the roads down to the river where John was baptizing others, what is he thinking? What is he desiring, choosing, longing for? With what words is he praying? As he watches John baptize humble sinners, looking into their faces as they go into and come out of the water, what is he feeling? As Jesus wades into the river, deeper and deeper, and then is immersed in it, can I imagine what is streaming through his consciousness? Does he experience his own incarnation into the depth of our humanity? Does he imagine the surrender of his own desires to God's spirit drawing him to complete emptying of himself for us? Does the picture of his being nailed to a cross to die flash before him? And when his face emerges from the water and God's voice breaks through the clouds, what exhilaration, freedom, and peace fill his heart?

As we go through this week imagining parts of these scenes over and over, in the very midst of the movements of our everyday lives, we come to know Jesus and our own desires more deeply than we could have imagined. We come to see how familiar he is with our own struggles to respond to God's call. How often this week will we leave one place we are at home for another place we know we must be? How often this week will a "yes" involve a deeper entry into a simple solidarity with all of humanity? Can some experience of my living out my own baptism this week allow me to experience deep intimacy with Jesus in his baptism?

We can end each day with a prayer of gratitude and personal conversation with Jesus, speaking our desire.

Pray in these or similar words...

Dear Jesus,

So many things touch me this week as I watch you. How did you ever leave home? I know how much your mother meant to you and that you lived with her in a home filled with great love. How did you hear the call from God for something more in your life? How did your "yes" feel inside when you prayed and knew you were being called to become one of us in such an intimate way?

I watch you leave home and walk off toward the river in the distance. It was so painful to leave home. You knew it was right, but that didn't make it easy. And what were you walking toward? Were you afraid of the uncertainty that faced you? Did you wonder exactly how this would all end up?

I see you on the riverbank watching John baptize the others. They are prayerful and deeply moved by these baptisms. At their baptisms, some of the people are quiet, and some are exhilarated. All of them have been moved to join with God in a new and deeper way. I see you watch their faces as they emerge, wet with water, shining with joy. Your love for each of them is so clear. You sit and pray for each of them with such a deep connection and love.

And then you join them.

You wade into the water where John is standing. He is surprised and resists, but only a word from you convinces him that this is right. He holds you and I watch as you are plunged into the darkness under the water. What is it like for you to be in that darkness, that coldness, eyes closed? With your birth you have joined us as part of the humanity in this world. Now with this baptism, you have joined in our sinfulness. What can that possibly mean?

Then your head comes up from the darkness in the water and I see the same joy shining on your face. You throw your head back, flinging water, and laugh out loud for pure happiness. John joins you in laughing, not knowing exactly why but knowing that he loves you. You turn and walk to the riverbank toward me and pull yourself up to sit next to me. I love to look at the joy on your face. You ask me if I want to join you in the waters.

Oh, Jesus, no. I'm too afraid. I want so much to be with you, to join you in this mission of yours. But I'm not worthy. I'm not good enough. Gently, you take my hand and talk with me about my fears. I feel the incredible strength and dignity of your presence next to me. Just because you want so much to be near me, Jesus, I feel less afraid.

What is it, Jesus, that makes me so afraid? If I take the plunge in my life, as you have, and accept this baptism, what does it mean for my life? How will my life be turned upside down? What will I have to leave that now feels so at home? Maybe what scares me most are the questions, What if I fail? and What if God is asking me to do more than I am capable of?

Still holding my hand, you ask me whether I can feel the love God has for me, the love you have for me. Yes, I can. But the fear is still there. I'm not worthy. I look into your face and see the love and friendship you have for me. I see that I am worthy just because of your love. Maybe I always think of myself as unworthy around you because it keeps me from getting too close. If I tell myself I'm not worthy to be with you, then I avoid the invitation from you that can change (and disrupt) my life. Keeping myself at a distance from you, Jesus, means that I can't hear you as clearly.

That isn't what I want. I don't want to be distant from you anymore. Over these past weeks and months I have grown so close to you. I feel the strength of your presence and know that I want to go with you, to be with you in your life, and to have you with me in mine.

Thank you for the love and friendship you give to me. Thank you for caring so much for me.