

A Fresh Start

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
January 15, 2023
by Rev. Dave Le Grand

I was blessed to have had the opportunity to volunteer on a kibbutz in Israel many years ago. Just before my 3-month tourist visa in Israel was to expire, I, and a couple of friends, travelled across Israel. One of our visits was to Mount Masada. If you don't know about Masada, it is an extraordinary piece of history, the broad strokes of which is that after a courageous revolt against the Roman Empire, the top of that mountain was the last stand for a community of Jews.

I and a couple of friends slept in our tiny car, got up before dawn, and we joined a group of tourists hiking up the mountain. A couple of hours later we arrived at the top. It was dark, so we couldn't see anything. We were invited to find a spot to rest, awaiting the sunrise.

That experience for me of that sunrise was a holy moment, revealing the Jordan valley and its mountains as far as the eye could see.

I also saw, for the first time, the site within which I sat. The sunlight revealed for me what was once a Roman palace, but taken over by Jewish militants, and it was their last stand. That morning, as I wiped the sleep out of my eyes, I wandered around, noting the signs describing the function of each structure, built over 2,000 years ago.

On screen is Herodian, another palace built in Herod's time that I visited near Bethlehem 15 years after Masada.

I am not an archaeologist, but I felt a child-like sense of wonder as I journeyed back in time, amazed by the architecture, imagining what life would have been like in this community. One thing I noted back then was the ritual baths, or "mikvehs."

I have come to realize that, in Judaism, mikvehs have long been the place where, according to Jewish Law, people would be ritually purified, and converts to Judaism, would mark their fresh start. I've also discovered that modern Jews mark milestones that are not mandated in by Jewish Law, but important nonetheless: graduations, bat or bar mitzvahs, or important birthdays, signifying a new start after pain or loss, immersing themselves in a mikveh to mark the completion of a year of bereavement, or recovery from divorce, abuse, or life-threatening illness.¹

I think about that encounter between John and Jesus, our story today. It is a story told by Mark and Luke, and today's story by Matthew, so this is an important story to the Jesus Movement.

The idea of immersing in water was familiar to Jews. but this baptism of John's is described in connection with a person's repentance, their turning away from sin. Jesus comes along and asks John to baptize him. John's reaction is immediate – why do you want to be baptized? After all, Jesus had no need for repentance.

¹ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-mikveh/> "What Is A Mikveh? Whether you're dunking for conversion or for any other reason, here's what to expect at the ritual bath." BY SHOSHANNA LOCKSHIN

It seems that it was a humbling moment for John. For when he baptized his cousin, there was a holy moment: a voice of the Holy declaring that this is my son, my beloved.

Ponder what the experience might have been like for witnesses that day along the river. Movement of Spirit. Hearing: This is my child, my beloved.

This is an opportunity for us, modern followers of Jesus, to consider: What is the significance of Baptism for us today?

Often it is rightly a time of cuteness – a little baby, sprinkled with water. Baptism marks a holy moment; a time to remind ourselves and the parents of that baby, or the more grown-up individuals who might ask to be baptized, remind ourselves that we are beloved. The Creator loves you. You are God's child.

I wonder if we have let go of some of the significance of this ancient tradition, this ritual of immersing, of transformation. Have we in our modern Christianity lost some significance that our ancestors enjoyed in baptism?

I wonder further if perhaps we need to take a fresh look at rituals like Baptism, Communion, to reclaim their power in fresh ways that are culturally relevant. Maybe, together, we could look at the practices like those of our progressive Jewish sisters and brothers; maybe we can take stock of all the major moments in our lives that we don't mark together.

Think of what we have come through. What we have lost, but, also the priceless blessings that take our breath away when we think about them. Can we liberate this Baptismal font, immersing God's children, those in but also those outside this community of faith, all God's children that God loves so much? How can we share God's Love in fresh new ways? Amen.