

January 7, Baptism of the Lord B (Mark 1:4–11)

As if he were working on an assembly line, John dips and raises, dips and raises.

by [JoAnn A. Post](#) in the [January 2024](#) issue

It was a cold day on the river—January in the Galilee. I was with fellow pilgrims from the United States, traversing the Holy Land with hearts open and mouths agape. We walked where Jesus walked. We smelled the salty sea air he smelled. We ate food he might have eaten. And on that brisk, biting day, we stood on the banks of the river in which Jesus was baptized.

I had hoped we might wade in the river, but it would have been unwise to do so that day. The riverbank was slick with reeds and rushes. The water was dark and cold. I was not willing to risk hypothermia for a photo opportunity. But at the very least, I wanted to touch the water.

In true American consumer fashion, I also wanted to obtain the water. I wasn't interested in the prepackaged bottled Jordan River water available everywhere from street vendors; I wanted the real thing. Creeping carefully down the bank, I knelt at the river's edge with a small bottle I had brought along specifically for this purpose and scooped up a scant cupful of this veritable holy water.

Here's what I was imagining: the tap water in the baptism font in my congregation back home mingled with holy water from the Jordan. I was imagining the moving sermons I would preach, the clever analogies I would draw, the tears on the faces of those doused with the same water in which Jesus was plunged. Though I am not ordinarily a seeker of talismans and amulets, Jordan River water held a fascination for me. And in that moment, on the slippery bank of the river, I held magic in a bottle.

When John baptizes Jesus in the Jordan, Jesus is but one of many. Remember, people from the whole Judean countryside are coming to the river to be baptized by John. In our imaginations, as Jesus emerges from the water, a spotlight cracks through the

sky and the world grows dark. As though onstage, Jesus gazes heavenward to see a ragged sky and a rocketing dove, to hear a voice that sounds like either James Earl Jones or Judi Dench, depending on your idea of what an authoritative voice sounds like.

But there is no spotlight. There is no stage. Jesus is dipped under the water by John's strong hands and then raised to his feet. Next! As though working an assembly line, John dips and raises, dips and raises. For hours. There is nothing magic about it. Just a long line of sinners in search of redemption in the muddy waters of the Jordan.

A pastoral colleague who ministers in Amman, Jordan, describes the reality of baptizing in the Jordan River. On more than one occasion, as he and his congregation stand in the river baptizing, random tourists shout at them from the shore: "Baptize me! Baptize me!" On a whim, these thrill seekers beg to be dunked in the river. But only after they've got cameras at the ready. My colleague is regarded as a magician, pulling a rabbit out of a river.

Meanwhile, I flew all the way home from the Middle East with a vial of water from the Jordan in my carry-on bag. I stored it in a place of honor in my office, eager to uncork it for the next baptism. Several months passed. And by the time I went to mingle the local waters of the Mississippi with the exotic waters of the Jordan, my vial of holy water had turned to a vial of vile. Murky. Smelly. The bottom of the jar coated in sediment and the top in slime. I tossed it out, jar and all.

I should have known. The Jordan is a shallow, silt-filled river that carries agricultural runoff, sewage, and political unrest downstream. It's too shallow to boat on and too polluted to swim in. The river marks a demilitarized zone between Israel and Jordan, its shores studded with armed snipers. The waters of the Jordan are diverted away from the Palestinian territories, contributing to one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. Water is always in short supply in that part of the world: the country that "owns" the Jordan for both irrigation and consumption is the winner.

There is—and was—nothing magic about baptizing in the Jordan. So, what is it, exactly, that we celebrate on Baptism of the Lord Sunday?

The sinless Son of God submits to an anonymous baptism in a local river at the hands of a local preacher. And then he goes back to work. There's no magic. Baptism in water—local or otherwise—is but one of many beginnings for us. Named and claimed, we emerge from the water with a new identity and a new purpose.

Both in being baptized and in daily remembering our baptisms, we dip and rise, dip and rise. We are immersed in the often murky reality of faithful life in God's world.