"Remember Your Baptism,"
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 1/11/26

Well, thirteen or so months in and I'm still setting up my office upstairs. But something I've had out pretty much from day one is this picture: it's of me and one of my seminary professors standing by the Jordan River. In my final year of seminary, I participated in a January term travel seminar to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. On one of our excursions, we went to the Jordan River, to a place where they've built up some infrastructure so that you can stand on a nice platform on the riverbank. Gordon Mikoski, my professor, suggested to the class that while we were at the site of Jesus's baptism, he could offer us a remembrance of baptism. So one by one, my classmates and I lined up and took turns standing with Gordon on the step closest to the river. And one by one, Gordon lifted water out of the muddy river and with it made a cross on each of our foreheads. "Remember your baptism," he said, "and be grateful."

Remember your baptism, and be grateful. I *am* grateful for that moment by the Jordan River – it gives me a baptismal moment I can remember. My actual baptism took place when I was just a few months old, at Zion Lutheran Church in Penbrook, Pennsylvania. I know I was surrounded by people who loved me: parents, family, generations of church friends and a beloved pastor. But of course I can't remember it – I was a tiny baby. So that moment in adulthood on the banks of the Jordan gives me something I can remember. Remember your baptism, and be grateful.

I am also grateful that one of my fellow travel seminar participants had the forethought to take pictures of each of us that day, to take pictures as Gordon's fingers reached out to touch our foreheads with the water. I keep the photo in my office as a reminder for both good days and hard days – at the very core of my being, I am a beloved child of God, washed clean in the waters of baptism. Beloved child of God is my identity: not how well received the sermon is on Sunday, or how quickly the budget is put together at the start of the year, or how expertly moderated the session meeting is. None of those things define who I am. My baptism defines who I am: beloved child of God is who I am. Sometimes I need that reminder.

Now if this scene by the banks of the Jordan sounds idyllic, in some ways it was – a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to stand where Jesus stood and participate in a ritual that he participated in; a holy moment of remembrance. But there is a bit more to the scene than just the holy moment. First of all, the Jordan River is not exactly the Delaware – at this point it's no wider than the Wissahickon. The water doesn't exactly run clear. And on top of that, the Jordan River is the border between the state of Israel and the kingdom of Jordan – two countries not known for how well they get along with each other. So on the Israeli side there's the nice platform that lets you get in the water, and on the Jordanian side there's also a platform – but standing on that platform are border patrol officers with machine guns, to prevent anyone from crossing the border by wading through the river.

On the one hand, it's a shame that the state of relations between neighboring countries is such that a visible reminder of force is necessary at what has been a holy site for thousands and thousands of years, even before the baptism of Jesus. And on the other hand, when I think of that visit to the river and zoom out beyond the tight frame captured by my classmate's camera – when I picture the whole scene and not just the water on my forehead, it's a reminder that our baptisms don't happen in a vacuum. Sure, for most of us Presbyterians they happen decently and in order in a peaceful and well-kept church, but they don't happen in a vacuum. Our baptisms happen in the midst of conflict, whether that is conflict in our families, conflict in our churches or in our communities, conflict in the wider world around us.

Jesus's baptism certainly happened in the midst of controversy and conflict. John the Baptist was out in the wilderness, proclaiming, "repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" John was an outsider, operating independently of the accepted religious institutions of his time, living off the land and claiming authority from God to wash people clean of their sins. I wonder what the religious authorities in Jerusalem thought when they heard what he was doing: did they feel annoyed? bemused? threatened?

In the passage right before the one we just read, Matthew tells us that some of those religious authorities, some Pharisees and Sadducees came out to the wilderness to see what all the fuss was about with this John guy and to be baptized themselves. John responds by calling them a brood of vipers. Probably not the way you greet people you're on good terms with. And before too long, John will be in trouble not only with the religious authorities, but also with the political ones, for speaking out against the immoral behavior of Herod Antipas, the Roman-backed ruler of the region. Herod will eventually have John beheaded for having the gall to publicly criticize his leadership.

So this holy moment of Jesus's baptism, this moment of humbly submitting himself to the same baptism as all the ordinary people who came to have their sins washed clean by John in the Jordan – this holy moment of Jesus's baptism didn't happen

in a vacuum either. It happened in the midst of conflict, both religious and political, in a time when God's people were frustrated with the way things were, tired of the oppression of Roman imperial rule; when people were trying to figure out how to make a better future for themselves and their nation, when they were searching for trustworthy leadership.

This is the moment when Jesus's baptism took place, a moment of conflict and frustration and anger and real danger – it is in *this* moment that the heavens open and God's Spirit descends like a dove and a voice speaks: "this is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." In the midst of confusion, clarity; in the midst of chaos, peace. And a reminder of the deepest truth, of the core of Jesus's identity: he is God's beloved Son.

Friends, we stand in the midst of our own moment of conflict and frustration and anger and danger. I know many of us are concerned about our nation's recent actions in Venezuela, concerned about the legality and morality of our country "taking over and running" a sovereign nation that did not ask for our assistance, in a move unauthorized by Congress, a move which appears to be motivated by greed rather than any actual concern for the safety of ordinary people in our nation or in Venezuela. And I know many of us are concerned about what happened in Minneapolis this week, when Renee Good, a wife and mother and by all accounts Christian person was shot in the face at point blank range by an ICE agent for no other reason than that she was watching him work.

We are concerned about what these actions mean for the direction our country is headed; we are grieving for the violence that we have watched play out, literally watched the video of a woman who could have been our own sister or daughter or friend being shot by a federal agent from just a few feet away. We are concerned for our immigrant neighbors who are living in fear of abduction and detention and separation from their families. We are concerned about the apparent erosion of due process and systems of accountability. We are wondering what we can do to help and what risks we are being called to take to live Jesus's love in our communities, wondering how we can have conversations across our deep political divides to stop the endless cycle of rage and fear and violence and begin moving forward together… It is all so much. If you feel confused, if you feel overwhelmed, if you feel so angry you can barely see straight – you are not alone.

And, in the quiet of this place, in this sacred moment we have together, we pause to remember our baptisms. Not to pretend that everything outside this holy moment is fine, because it isn't. And it wasn't for Jesus either. But like Jesus, we pause to remember our baptisms and be reminded of who we are at the deepest core of our being: we are children of God. We are children of God, washed clean in the waters of baptism. We are named and claimed by the God of the universe. Even before we could choose God, God chose us. We are loved beyond our wildest imaginings. Who we are is loved. That is our identity.

In the quiet of this moment, we pause to remember our baptisms. We pause to see the Spirit descending on us and hear the voice of God saying to us, you are my beloved child. When the world seems to be spinning out of control, remembering our baptisms can anchor us in the love of God, the love of God which grounds us. Any time you wash your hands or start the dishwasher or feel a drop of rain fall on your forehead, remember the waters of your baptism – remember the waters of your baptism and be reconnected to the love of God for you in Christ Jesus our Lord.

But don't stop at remembering your own belovedness. Our baptisms are also a reminder that we are not the only children God so loves. Every single person that we encounter is also a child God so loves. Every single person we encounter is a child God so loves, regardless of race or class, regardless of age or health, regardless of gender or sexuality, regardless of nationality or immigration status or societal label – every single person I encounter is a beloved child of God, just as I am.

Baptism is, after all, more than just an affirmation of our belovedness – baptism is also a commission for service in Christ's name. Baptism is, after all, more than just an affirmation of our own belovedness – baptism is a commission to share the love of God with every person we encounter. A commission to treat every person with the dignity and respect due to a fellow beloved child of God. A commission to create systems that provide enough for every beloved child of God. A commission to build communities that offer the chance to live in peace to every beloved child of God. A commission to fundamentally reorient ourselves and our world in recognition that every single person is a beloved child of God.

This moment in our world is confusing and terrifying and enraging, yes. And. At the deepest core of who we are, we are God's beloved children, washed clean in the waters of baptism. So remember your baptism, and be grateful. And go out from this place full of the Holy Spirit, ready to live your baptismal commission, sent to love and be loved, until every person rests secure in our true and shared identity: beloved.