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John 9:1-41
1 Samuel 16:1-13
Psalm 23
Romans 5:8-14

March 22, 2020
The Fourth Sunday of Lent

When I think of holy water, I think of the Jordan River. Before I ever saw the Jordan River in person for the first time, I had this lovely pastoral image of what I thought it would look like. Smooth, flowing water gently moving over rocks flanked by green and mossy banks. A subtle breeze. The smell of flowers. The songs of birds. A place to sit and relax and reflect. I couldn't wait to take it all in.

And, then my bus pulled up to what looked like any old tourist stop in Israel. Complete with a gift shop full of mass produced images of saints, postcards to send home, keychains made in China, and refrigerator magnets with scripture quotes. There were white robes you could buy if you wanted to be baptized in the river and fancy certificates you could fill out to commemorate the occasion. At the back of the shop were double doors that led onto a concrete patio overlooking a 50-foot-wide section of the Jordan.

From the patio, there were multiple stairways with hand rails leading down to the water. Take your pick. Walk down and dip your toes in. Then step aside for the next person in line. It was noisy and commercial. There were bus fumes. I bought a cold baguette with cheese for lunch at the snack counter and then rushed back to my bus to continue on to our next stop.

That was my first experience at the Jordan. Not as pastoral as I had hoped.

On another trip years later, we didn't even have time to stop at the river so our tour guide just pointed out the bus window at a muddy little stream that dripped through a pipe under the street. "There's the Jordan!" he proclaimed. The water looked rather sad as though it might dry up at any minute. It wasn't the kind of water you would want to touch, much less allow it to wash your sins away. It looked murky and dirty.

And then there was the time I visited the source of the Jordan River. It gushed out clean and strong with a loud rhythm that almost sang in your ears as you listened to the massive amounts of water pushing its way along rocky river banks to travel to distant places far out of sight. The water was clean and bright, untainted by the miles it would soon travel. It was cold and crisp; like the mountain springs I grew up playing in. As you stood next to it, the spray of the river spotted your clothes with water droplets and cooled you down from the heat of the sun.

The Jordan River. Each place I encountered it never looked the same and yet it was always holy. Commercial, muddy, or clean and strong. The holiness of that water never wavers.

In our Gospel reading, the image that stands out to me the most is Jesus, blind man, and mud. The mud that Jesus creates when he spits in the dirt. In reality, Jesus must have spit quite a lot

in that dirt in order to make enough mud to cover the man's eyes. A thick, muddy concoction of liquid and dirt, wiped across a hopeful, lonely face and the holiness was undeniable.

It reminds me of that muddy water of the Jordan making its way under the street. It wasn't spectacular. It wasn't beautiful. It was messy and maybe even a bit polluted but it was of the same goodness and the same potential as the water that sprang so strongly from the river's source. Because that messy water (tainted somewhere along the way) will eventually flow to that part of the Jordan River where countless people immerse themselves year after year to take a moment and feel a little of God's grace. God's love mixing with the water that has traveled so far and picked up all kinds of dirt along the way. And it is so good.

For me, this image of hopefulness in the midst of messiness, of holiness in the midst of mud, is more beautiful than anything I can imagine right now. Maybe because our lives have gotten a little messier. Our close proximity to loved ones (all trying to navigate living under the same roof day in and day out) may bring forth old wounds that need tending. Our distance from others may remind us of words that had been left unsaid, of apologies, or expressions of love or gratitude that we didn't say when we had the chance. Maybe the time we now have to ourselves, alone and rather isolated, may be creating space for us to address long ignored patterns in our own lives that need redirection.

And here is the hopefulness...each of these realities is full of potential, no matter how muddy they may have gotten.

When Jesus presses the mud onto the man's eyes, there is no denying the blindness underneath. Think of the power of that moment...Jesus knelt down, saw worth in this man and out of mud healed all of his pain. Where no one had seen value, Jesus saw holiness.

What if we took that image to heart?

As our world slows down, we have no choice but to look around us and within us. To notice the places in our lives that have gotten a little dirty and are in need of tending. Remember that even those places that we have ignored or hidden are still worthy and valuable. They may have gotten tainted along the way (life is just like that) but never, not once, has holiness left them.

So maybe in the days ahead, as we slow down and look around, we can begin to face the things we have been too busy or too scared or too hurt or too ashamed to name. Maybe in these moments of solitude, we name and claim those parts of our lives we have avoided. And, then may you imagine Jesus bending down, looking directly at you with love and compassion as he presses mud into what hurts.

Because you have never been without holiness. Amen.