

Lessons at the border

By Suzanne Elsesser
NC News Service

I hate to say this, but the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized by John looks an awful lot like the Bronx River as it flows through the Bronx Zoo in New York City.

I first saw the Jordan River as I crossed from the country of Jordan into the Israeli-occupied West Bank. The water itself was dark, almost brown in color. It moved slowly. The river could not have been more than 20 feet wide at the Allenby Bridge where I crossed.

On first view, today's reality of the river as a border between an occupied territory and Jordan stunned me.

I sat in silence with the rest of my group as our bus was stopped at the river. A Jordanian soldier entered the bus, gave us a cheerful greeting in English and checked our passports.

He could have been a conductor on the New Haven Railroad, which commuters take from their suburban homes to jobs in New York City, except for the gun hanging from his shoulder.

From the bus window I could see a sandbag and cement bunker with more automatic weapons pointed across the river.

We crossed into the West Bank. The narrow wooden bridge with no side rails seemed like one of the many small bridges that cross the winding

streams of New England. I heard the same soft, bumping noise as the tires moved over the uneven wooden timbers.

But the Allenby Bridge has a 12-inch-wide white line painted sideways across its center point.

The border. And on the other side? Again, a sandbag and cement bunker, inspection by soldiers and machine guns pointed across the river toward the border guards we had just left.

Several days later we returned to the Jordan River upstream to visit the place that is, reportedly, the actual site of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. Not until then, when I actually walked into the water myself, did I reflect on the importance of the area as recorded in all four gospels.

And whether that spot is the actual site or not is unimportant to the reality that is commemorated there: that God became man and went out to actively teach and serve the people.

I always have found the gospel accounts of Jesus and John at the Jordan appealing. I like the image of Jesus approaching John, even surprising him perhaps, asking to be baptized, then going off into the heat and dirt of the desert for 40 days, where he was tempted.

The scene puts Jesus' humanity and divinity in focus for me. He is divine, yet he seeks baptism. He is divine, yet he is tempted. And all of that before beginning his ministry among the people.

This beginning of Jesus' public involvement in the life of people speaks to our own human attempts to live as he did, to find a way to balance the paradoxes in our individual lives and in the larger world.

Now at this spot one finds a famous border. The tensions reflected in this border are such that they preoccupy the world's top leaders. It makes one think.

In common with other Christians, I struggle to find ways to cross the borders so easily established in personal life. They serve as dividing lines, pitting self-centered ways against the needs others have for love.

In common with other Christians, I also struggle with the reality of guns pointing at guns across the many "white lines" throughout the world, and with the opposing viewpoints those borders reflect. And I wonder, what does it take today to be a peacemaker?

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FOOD...

...for thought

"The deepest desire of any man or woman who thinks is to make sense out of life." They sense that life is good and that it holds great potential. "But they can find in it no certain clue as to its purpose."

However, the people who met Jesus "found in their experience of him the clue we all seek. Their main impression of him was that he made sense of life."

With those thoughts, Benedictine Father Edmund Flood introduced a little book he wrote a few years back titled "Jesus and His Contemporaries." (Paulist)

Why do you think people continue to tell the story of Jesus? Why does it continue to fascinate? What makes it so compelling?

—He had a penetrating message that people could live by. That's part of the reason people continue to turn to Jesus. His message itself attracts.

—Millions upon millions of people over the course of 2,000 years have felt the impact of Jesus on their faith. There is a desire to get back to the person, to understand this person, who so greatly influenced the world's course.

Yet those reasons don't fully explain why people still want to know the story of Jesus.

—Interest in the message—

what he said — is only part of the explanation.

—Interest in the past — in what happened 2,000 years ago — also offers only a partial explanation.

For Christians, Jesus is more than a message. He is someone, a person. As such, the potential for a relationship with Jesus draws many people to his story.

Again, Jesus is not simply someone from the past. To Christians, he is very much in the present. Curiosity about past historical developments does not suffice to explain the interest in Jesus.

Perhaps no person can ever be fully known. One is always getting to know the other person, never exhausting all that the other person means.

This helps to explain the inexhaustible interest in Jesus. It helps to explain why the church literally never stops telling the story of Jesus.

For people continue to want to know what happened 2,000 years ago, what the message was — and what this helps to reveal about the meaning of Jesus today.

People continue to want to know how this person named Jesus helps them to discover the purpose in their own lives.

...for discussion

SECOND HELPINGS

"Re-Treat Your Family to Lent," by Sister Sandra DeGidio, OSM. The book contains reflections and historical background on the traditions of Lent, along with Lenten activities. The author notes that much in the 50-page booklet has been drawn from her extensive parish work. In a discussion of the place of fasting, Sister DeGidio makes the interesting suggestion that for many people, simply "to stop rushing about and jamming our lives with busyness, noisy distraction and anxiety" might be a "true form of fasting." She says such fasting "calls us to quiet our lives in order that we might live more deeply and with more meaning. It calls us...to listen and see and feel in a more human way." (St. Anthony Messenger, 1615 Republic St., Cincinnati, Ohio, 45210. 1983. \$1.95)

1. Father David K. O'Rourke suggests that God's expectations can take us by surprise, just as they must have taken John the Baptist by surprise. What do you think he means? Can you think of an example from your own life?

2. The Gospel of Mark begins the way good books begin, suggests David Gibson. The first page of the story grabs the reader's attention and creates the impression that something important is at stake. After reading the beginning of that Gospel, do you agree with Gibson?

3. While visiting the Jordan River — a modern, tension-filled border — Suzanne Elsesser's thoughts turn to the borders (boundaries) people erect in their lives. Often these boundaries become obstacles to growth. What divides people today? What can a Christian do to break down needless boundaries between people in any area of life?

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strongly to certain elements in John's audience. They thought it would mean the defeat of Israel's enemies and the raising of the nation to heights of prosperity and supremacy.

But many others were turned off by John's rigorous way of life and his call for a radical change of outlook (Matthew 11:18).

Early Christian tradition interpreted John's role differently. Obviously Elijah had not returned to inaugurate God's reign, but Christ had come and that reign had dawned in his person. Accordingly Christians saw John, not as the herald of Elijah, but of Christ. In the process they made John himself an Elijah-figure.