

Holy water everywhere

The dirty river in Jesus' neighborhood and the one in mine

Cover Story

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Sign alongside the Chicago River North Branch, River Park, Chicago. Photo by [Josiah Thorngate](#).

I was baptized in a swimming pool in my childhood pastor's backyard. I was seven. Asked to make a confession of faith, I mumbled something incoherent through chattering teeth. I was focused on the embarrassing fact that my feet did not reach the bottom; my pastor and my dad had to hold me up.

The congregation was young then and worshiped in a font-less gymnasium. These days it does baptisms either in its baptistry or in a lake across town. The pastor who baptized me is long gone. So is his backyard pool—I checked.

I checked because I've long been vaguely bothered by the fact that my baptism happened in such an arbitrary, rootless place, in neither a church nor a natural body

of water. Over time, my sense of self has grown increasingly dependent on a sense of physical place—and my spirituality has grown deeper baptismal roots. I find myself longing to return to the place of my baptism. But that place doesn't exactly exist; the land remains, but not the water.

Baptism, says liturgical theologian Gordon Lathrop, is *locative*. We are baptized in the water of a particular place, into the physical life of a particular community. The earth as universalized abstraction, the faith as otherworldly or purely cerebral—the water of baptism pushes hard against such tendencies. This place, here—this ground, this water—is holy.

But this is just half the story. In Lathrop's telling, baptism is also *liberative*. We are baptized into the global body of Christ, into solidarity with the whole earth and its people. The closed and insular community, the impulse to contain God within four walls—baptism pushes against these tendencies as well. The earth and water here are intimately connected to earth and water elsewhere, and those places are holy, too.

Baptism holds the locative and liberative in tension, revealing what Lathrop calls "the hole in the system"—like the hole in the heavens at Jesus' baptism—of any attempt to map the cosmos according to the local status quo on the one hand or escape elsewhere on the other. Baptism creates its own map, one that both locates us in a holy place and liberates us for the life of the holy earth. It is not a local map that stresses boundaries and the dangerous unknown that lies beyond them; nor is it a globe that erases everything particular, small, and nearby. Also, it is not a map of a faraway land of ancient saints and relics. The holy place is not a discrete somewhere else. It is everywhere, and it is here.



In just such a faraway land, there is a church

where sixth-century Christians mapped their world on the floor beneath their feet. At St. George's in Madaba, Jordan, a large mosaic map depicts the surrounding region. The map highlights various biblical sites; it also encompasses Madaba itself, a holy place among holy places.

This map isn't tucked into some corner of St. George's. It's on the floor—it is the floor—of the worship space itself. The community that gathered there stood on its own holy ground, which contained a representation of that ground's connection to the world around it. The church's sacramental practice was literally held up by an image of the local land in relationship with the upper room in Jerusalem, with the table in Emmaus, with Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist at the Jordan.

The baptismal site is on the East Bank, 16 miles northwest of Madaba. Bethany Beyond the Jordan—not to be confused with Bethany on the West Bank, home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus—is a Byzantine pilgrimage destination that was rediscovered around the turn of the 20th century, based partly on information provided by the Madaba map. It's also called *Bethabara*, the name Judges 7 uses for the location of Gideon's defeat of the Midianites. Bethany has become the jewel of Jordan's several biblical sites, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors each year.

They don't come for the natural beauty. At the Alumot Dam—just south of the Sea of Galilee—the Israelis divert most of the Jordan's water for irrigation and drinking. Nearby, sewage and agricultural runoff are emptied into what's left of the river. A few miles downstream it picks up the Yarmouk, its biggest tributary—though the

Yarmouk would be a lot bigger at this point if the Jordanians weren't diverting a whole lot of its water, too. By the time the Lower Jordan gets down to Bethany, it's just a dirty little stream (see ["River revival"](#)). Last year, Israel began releasing more fresh water through the Alumot, a good step but so far a relatively small one. For now, visitors to Bethany are often disappointed by the river itself.

"The river isn't the river we had back 2,000 years ago," said Rustom Mkhjian, the Baptism Site Commission's director of archaeological works and our guide when I visited. "That's why we'll visit two different sites, if you don't mind." A short walk from the riverbank sit the ruins of a chapel and a large cruciform font, the actual place where pilgrims once observed Jesus' baptism and underwent their own. A set of marble steps remains, steps that took baptismal candidates down to the water. A



water at the bottom of the steps was chest high in the winter.

I visited in the fall and found the font entirely

dry. It's a striking site, this ancient place in the history of Christian baptism. It'd be even more striking with some water. But there isn't always enough left in the Jordan.

Some of it leaves with pilgrims, who take the river home with them by the bottle full. (They used to do this by the barrel full.) This practice is not a major reason the Lower Jordan is so diminished, of course; that distinction goes to the dams upstream. Still, when you visit a depleted little river, it's an odd spiritual practice to take a little more of its water with you when you go.

It's odd, that is, if the whole world is holy. If you feel instead that the rare holiness of Jesus' baptismal site renders other places comparatively profane, then why not take

a bottle of extra-polluted, extra-holy water to go? At this point, the Lower Jordan is no longer big enough to technically count as a river at all. “It’s not even a river,” said Mkhjian, “yet it is the holiest of rivers in the entire world.”

Our group heard a lot of this sort of superlative in Jordan: we were walking on exceptionally holy ground. That’s appealing language for Christians who hunger to know the Bible’s world intimately, not to mention for a nation that could use their tourism dollars. It’s less helpful, however, for a spirituality of baptism that locates and liberates. “We’ll respect the [baptismal] site,” said Mkhjian, stressing its fragility, “because we’re walking in the place where John and Jesus walked.” There and elsewhere, of course, we walk in places created by God. This ought to be reason enough to respect them.

And yet I found Bethany deeply moving. Jesus’ baptismal site, after all, has something in common with my own: an off-putting lack of water. I went to the place where pilgrims have long marked the institution of Christian baptism, and I found it as dry as the backyard where my childhood pastor’s pool used to be. Baptism happens in a particular place, with particular water. Thank God it isn’t limited to the fragile waters of a single place but encompasses them within a far greater reality, a whole world of holy water.

At the Jordan, I knelt down like one of Gideon’s soldiers, dipped my hand in the brown water, and made the sign of the cross. I remembered my baptism while kneeling at the place where Jesus was baptized—or at least near it, where a smelly little rivulet remains.

My wife and I like to do this when we’re walking alongside water. We haven’t traveled outside North America together, but we’ve crossed ourselves and each other at the Rose River in the Shenandoah Valley and anonymous streams in West Virginia, at deep lakes in Wisconsin and shallow ones in California, at big bays off Great Lakes and even bigger ones off oceans. Years ago, we began a tradition of a silent walk on Good Friday. We improvise the route, but we always end up along water near wherever we’re living: Rock Creek in Washington, D.C., the Potomac River in Maryland, Lake Michigan in Chicago.



A couple of years ago we moved across

town to Chicago's northwest side, farther from the lake but just steps from where the Chicago River North Branch joins the North Shore Channel, a hundred-year-old drainage canal built to flush the flimsy North Branch downstream. If people know one thing about the Chicago River, it's that engineers once reversed its flow: it used to pour sewage into Lake Michigan, now it draws clean water out of it. But that's the river's Main Stem, which bisects the central business district. The North Branch is a tributary that has always flowed downtown, into the Main Stem, and it was and remains absolutely disgusting.

It has improved in recent decades, actually. An ongoing project of tunnels and reservoirs redirects more and more wastewater away from the river. Canoes and kayaks have returned to the North Branch. So has fishing—especially in our neighborhood, where a small waterfall connecting the river with the canal provides some fauna-friendly aeration. Swimming, however, remains restricted, and in hot weather the North Branch smells just awful.

We moved in shortly before Holy Week. On Good Friday we took our customary silent walk by the local water. On the river bank, we saw this sign:

Caution. This waterway is not suitable for:

- Wading

- Swimming
- Jet skiing
- Water skiing/tubing
- Any human body contact

Blessing didn't get its own bullet point, but the implication seemed pretty clear. We agreed, wordlessly, not to dip our hands in.

There's a lot that's fascinating about the reversal of the Chicago River, from the engineering innovation itself to the fact that it transformed Chicago from Lake Michigan's dirtiest polluter to its thirstiest consumer. But what fascinates me most is that the project joined two major watersheds. In the northern Midwest, water ends up in either the Great Lakes system or the Mississippi River. The Chicago River and Michigan water to the Des Plaines, to the Illinois, as a spigot from one watershed to the other. The



This is not entirely a good thing. Instead of treating

wastewater locally like most cities do, Chicago flushes it out west, semitreated, for another place to deal with. And when an invasive species turns up in one of the two watersheds—as the Asian carp has in recent years, making its way up the Mississippi—it's a problem for both of them. Lately, advocates for healthy waterways

have stressed the need to work toward re-reversing the river. Whatever else this feat of early 20th-century engineering was, it was a rejection of the locative, a failure to live sustainably within a place.

Ultimately, of course, the water was always connected and always will be. The Gulf of Mexico that receives the Mississippi is part of the same ocean that receives the Great Lakes by way of the Saint Lawrence. Watersheds are deeply invested in the local, but most flow eventually to the sea. This is why some Christian thinkers are finding watersheds to be such a useful way of thinking about faithful, sustainable living: because they draw local boundaries by natural rather than civil means, but also because these boundaries are not absolute, not locative to a fault (see [“Watershed disciples”](#)). Watersheds are not closed loops.

A few, however, are dead ends. One notable example: the Jordan River basin, which terminates at the fast-receding Dead Sea. There are plans to build a “Red-Dead Canal” between the rhyming biblical seas, essentially an expensive and environmentally disruptive end around the problem of the parched Lower Jordan. It’ll be a watershed intervention on par with Chicago’s—but flowing into the Jordan basin, not out of it. The trickle of Jordan that makes it all the way down to Jesus’ baptism site never sees the ocean. Six more miles and it arrives at the Dead Sea, where it has another chance to leave by gift-shop bottle before it evaporates or simply remains, soaking up its legendary salt at its legendarily low elevation, in isolation from the rest of the world. The basin is “the lowest point on earth,” said Mkhjian, “the closest to heaven.”

The closest to heaven? It’s surely a holy place. But for those of us who don’t live there, is this our holy ground, our baptismal identity? The Jordan basin has a singular significance—geologically, historically, even geopolitically. But it is one thing to visit such a place and love it. It’s quite another to learn to love your own, comparatively ordinary place—and through it to love a whole world of interconnected ordinary places. “Through the baptism of your dear Son,” goes the famous “flood prayer” of Martin Luther, “you sanctified and set apart the Jordan and all waters as a blessed flood.” All waters, not just or even especially the Jordan.

My first child is a year old, and her Episcopalian mom and Lutheran dad haven’t had her baptized yet. This is due to practical issues, people’s schedules and the like. Yet part of me doesn’t mind waiting, because I wish all our children could have something we can’t yet offer them: a baptism in a place and a faith community

where we're growing deep roots, ideally a place with a natural body of water to center our baptismal life. Perhaps our neighborhood on the northwest side will become this long-term home; while we've never planned to stay for more than a couple of years, growing roots doesn't always happen according to plan.

One thing we won't be doing: baptizing her in the Chicago River. My church is right down the street, but when we go outside for baptisms it's all the way to Lake Michigan, where the water is cleaner. There's no good theological reason for baptismal water to be perfectly pure, of course. Purity, suggests Lathrop, is a value of the insular community, of the overly locative. Baptism is not a ritual purity bath so much as a subversion of the very concept, a paradoxical initiation rite that turns us toward the world's uncleanness.

Still, a person's baptism probably shouldn't land her in the hospital, and I live in a place where the local water is, as the sign says, "not suitable for any human body contact." At the Jordan, multifaith groups are working to make the water more plentiful and more suitable. Perhaps one way for my family to grow roots where we're planted is to get involved with similar efforts on behalf of our own waterway. A river is, after all, the very picture of water that both locates and liberates, that exists in a place but doesn't stagnate there—the "living water" the Didache presents as the best option for baptism. And water that's too dirty for a baptism is also too dirty to give life in more mundane, day-to-day ways.

But first-rate liturgical symbolism doesn't make a good baptism, and neither does caring for the earth. God's grace does—a grace that infuses the definitively holy water of every time and place. At the disappeared Lower Jordan, at the former site of a swimming pool, at whatever place my daughter is finally dunked or splashed three times—God moves in whatever water is available. God plants us in a place but also forms us for the life of other places, for the whole fragile, holy, water-soaked world.

PHOTOS: Sign alongside the Chicago River North Branch, River Park, Chicago; the Jordan River flowing into the Dead Sea, detail of the mosaic map in Madaba, Jordan (photo by WitR / iStock); cruciform font at Jesus' baptismal site, just east of the Jordan (photo by Witold Ryka / iStock); concrete spillway that connects the Chicago River North Branch with the North Shore Channel; trash and foam collect alongside the spillway. (All Chicago River photos by [Josiah Thorngate](#).)