

I was just a young girl who loved following my older brother Nathanael around in our small rural village in Palestine. Though he was 7 years older than me, he didn't treat me like I was a girl, expecting me to become more like our mother and stay home to cook, care for the animals, and watch our for my younger siblings.

One day Nathanael told me he had heard that a traveling preacher was in town and was preaching some new message about the messiah coming soon, but the preacher wasn't from Jerusalem or sent by the Chief Priests in the Holy Temple. Nathanael said he had heard that this man would be holding a kind of meeting by the river starting in the morning. I was determined to go too, and when Nathanael saw he couldn't convince me to stay home, we decided to get up extra early to finish our chores then walk down to the river to see what this traveling preacher man was all about.

There were not as many people as I'd imagined, but that did not stop the man's intensity. His attire matched his message: wearing clothes of camel's hair that were clearly handmade and a leather belt so worn that had cracked in a few places. He was standing at the water's edge proclaiming his message with fiery determination:

- “Come, and be baptized – enter if you dare into these waters – and proclaim by your actions your break with the powers of empire; your resolve to live life differently; your commitment to studying the teachings of our God: the God who led our people through the waters on their way to freedom from slavery in Egypt's land; the God who guided our people through the wilderness, and when they were thirsty, provided sweet water from the rocks, so that they could keep on keeping on to the Promised Land.”
- “Come, and be baptized as a sign of your repentance from the ways of the world that declare as winners the ones with power; money; and secrets to hold over others in order to keep down those below from ever gaining on them.”
- Come, and be baptized, and let these waters cleanse your mind of the story from the world that says you are nothing because you are poor; that you are nothing because you are uneducated; that you are nothing because you are old; that you are nothing because you are young; that you are nothing because you are not male.

- “Come, and be baptized and feel the forgiveness that lets you in on the secret God has sent me to reveal to you: you are accepted; accept you are accepted and nothing will stand in your way. Let these waters wash away the identity put upon you by a world ruled by Roman exceptionalism, and give you instead a new name; a new self-understanding; a new community in which the powers of the world are renounced and the reign of God – our liberator – our defender – our provider, is at hand.

- Come, and be baptized!

“wade in the water, wade in the water children, wade in the water, God’s gonna trouble the water.” The man sang his invitation to each person standing before him on the riverbank – his large, weathered hand outstretched to lead each one into the flowing current while those on the shore waiting their turn began humming in response the tune where he left off.

I listened and watched with my heart in my throat – I couldn’t believe what I’d just heard. I squeezed Nathanael’s hand and looked at my brother’s face. The look in his eyes matched the eyes of the man in the water – electric; defiant; the look of complete agreement and belief that what this man said was true. My squeeze brought Nathanael’s attention back and he looked down at me, squeezed my hand in return, and then let it go as he moved forward toward the river – toward the man’s outstretched hand.

I looked around at the other people standing close to me, and I locked eyes with another person standing just a few yards away. He looked like my brother, but just a few years older, and he had woodchips in his hair, so I figured he worked in a carpenter’s shop nearby, but I’d never seen him before.

He gave me a look that seemed to say, *“do you believe it? Do you believe what this man is saying?”* in a way that suggested that he did, so I turned my eyes to look again at the water, searching for my brother, still feeling that man’s gaze like a hand on my back, gently nudging me forward, toward the water’s edge.

My feet began to move and suddenly I was there before the man in the water, his hand outstretched to me, beckoning me to take hold and come into the river.

I grasped his hand and slid down the muddy bank feeling the current push against my legs and tug at my robe. I felt the man’s hand protectively on my back to keep me still and I heard his voice, quiet and loud at the same time, say, **“do you, child of God, by entering these waters, repent from living according to the ways of the world, resolve to live your life as though the Reign of God is already at hand, and accept that you are accepted and forgiven?”**

“Y-e-ss, I d-do” I stammered out, nervous but not scared. Then I felt myself being leaned back into the water, its bubbles and eddies lifting my toes from the riverbed and its current close over my head. Then with a rush, I was upright again, water streaming from my face and down my hair. The man helped me back to the water’s edge and another hand reached down from the bank to help me up. It was the next person waiting to go into the water. It was the man with woodchips in his hair. His hand clasped mine and firmly pulled me up to solid ground.

I barely had time to thank him before he stepped into the water, towards the baptizer’s outstretched hand. Nathanael was waiting for me, and he put his arm around me while I turned back to the river to watch, feeling a special kinship with the person who passed through the waters just after me.

The one baptizing asked the man the same questions, and the man with woodchips in his hair said “yes.” Then the man was plunged underwater, and just as he was coming up out of the water, a strange kind of cloud passed over the sun, making it seem like a hole had been torn in the blue garment that was our summer sky, but just for an instant – then all was back to normal.

As this man was walking up from the water, another strange thing happened: a dove came and perched on this man’s shoulder. I love to watch birds flying, and I immediately looked around for other doves, but there were no others, nor any trees nearby for it to have come from.

The man again made eye contact with me as he made his way around the groups of people still waiting along the shore, and as he passed by, he smiled at me – a smile of initiation and inclusive welcome. I’ve never forgotten that smile.

He did not stay to watch the others, but continued walking away from the crowds, not back towards town, but out further still into the wilderness, remarkably, still with that bird on his shoulder. Nathanael and I were speechless with awe. We watched him grow smaller and smaller until we couldn't see him anymore. We sensed that something more than just a ritual washing and cleansing had happened to that man, and maybe even to us, because we were there. We witnessed something that for the rest of our lives we would continue to ponder and figure out.

Nathanael and I realized that we were likely missed at home, so we turned away from the river and headed back to town. And as we walked, we could still hear the faint strains of the baptizer's song and the people singing with him:

"wade in the water, wade in the water children, wade in the water, God's gonna trouble the water." 2x