

Week 19

Journey from Nazareth to the River Jordan Baptism

Guide: Jesus' Journey into His Mission



We now return to contemplating the life of Jesus. We reflect on the *two ways of desiring* and *three types of responses* we have prepared to let Jesus show us his life. Our desire to know him more intimately, as we fall more deeply in love with him, is shaping our desire to be with him more completely in his mission. We have been drawn to ask more and more deeply that we might be given the graces to choose only and whatever is for the greater glory of God and the salvation of our souls.

The part of Jesus' life we focus on this week is his journey from home into his mission. At some point, perhaps around the age of thirty, Jesus leaves Nazareth and goes down to the river Jordan, where John is baptizing. He enters the water and, against John's reluctance, asks to be baptized along with everyone else. The heavens open and we hear God's affirmation of him.

The material that follows will assist in getting started with this contemplation. All week we want to walk around in this scene in our everyday life. As we imagine Jesus leaving that little house in Nazareth, we have so many questions to ask. Why did he leave? What process of reflection, of freedom, led him to go? Can we imagine the farewells? What did people say to him? What did he say to friends, to relatives, to Mary? As he walks the roads down to the river where John was baptizing others, what is he thinking? What is he desiring, choosing, longing for? With what words is he praying? As he watches John baptize humble sinners, looking into their faces as they go into and come out of the water, what is he feeling? As Jesus wades into the river, deeper and deeper, and then is immersed in it, can I imagine what is streaming through his consciousness? Does he experience his own incarnation into the depth of our humanity? Does he imagine the surrender of his own desires to God's spirit drawing him to complete emptying of himself for us? Does the picture of his being nailed to a cross to die flash before him? And when his face emerges from the water and God's voice breaks through the clouds, what exhilaration, freedom, and peace fill his heart?

As we go through this week imagining parts of these scenes over and over, in the very midst of the movements of our everyday lives, we come to know Jesus and our own desires more deeply than we could have imagined. We come to see how familiar he is with our own struggles to respond to God's call. How often this week will we leave one place we are at home for another place we know we must be? How often this week will a "yes" involve a deeper entry into a simple solidarity with all of humanity? Can some experience of my living out my own baptism this week allow me to experience deep intimacy with Jesus in his baptism?

We can end each day with a prayer of gratitude and personal conversation with Jesus, speaking our desire.

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week

Getting started this week is easy. Every one of us has had some sort of experience of leaving home, of responding to a call, of having to leave something or someone behind to journey in fidelity to who we are. So letting Jesus show us his departure from Nazareth for the river Jordan will be easy, if we let our imaginations be informed by our own experience. Try to take this first part of our week's contemplation and let it be the grace we pray for as we step out of bed each morning. Use words to help shape the day's reflection: "Lord, show me what led you to leave your home in Nazareth for your very public ministry. I so want to know you and grow in love for your way of responding to your mission. Show me what you want to show me about the journey of your heart. I want to listen today."

By the middle of the week we will be ready to contemplate the baptism. The scene is simple, but the drama is tremendous. Think about it and imagine it enough to let it have the power it can have. If we love Jesus, we have to have some feeling about watching him approach this baptism. He doesn't *need* to do this. He could say to God, "I have not sinned; I don't need to do this act of repentance. I'm not like those people entering that water." But, of course, that is not his response to God's call that he become one with us. We can allow ourselves to be caught up in feelings of awe and appreciation and joy for him as he comes to the freedom of this baptism. We can let ourselves be touched by what his baptism means for us.

Each morning we can ask for the graces we need: "Lord, let me *be there* as you enter into the waters of baptism with me and for me. You are wonderful and I love you. I so want to be with you and together with you in your mission. Give me what I need this week to surrender more and more for God's glory and the salvation of my soul."

Each evening, we can spend a brief moment speaking to our Lord in our own words. We express our gratitude. We share some image that touches us. We tell him about how some moment in our day became *different* because we were contemplating this journey of his life this week. Whenever we feel the desire for deeper graces, we can make the triple prayer to Mary, Jesus, and God the Father, as was outlined two weeks ago. Use the prayer help "In These or Similar Words . . ." to help with the expressions of intimate prayer that can help us own the graces of this week.

Finally, please consider sharing some of the graces that come to you as a result of these rich contemplations in everyday life.

For the Journey: Bathed in Christ

We are praying this week with two sensitive and frightening experiences in the life of Jesus and subsequently in our own lives. One is the celebration and reflection on the baptism of Jesus. In the Exercises, Ignatius would have us first watch Jesus leave his home and his mother. This scene is not in Scripture, but Ignatius cannot picture Jesus casually and callously moving out without a tender scene of separation.

Jesus will ask his own disciples to leave everything, including their father and their boats. Ignatius too had to leave his family and home and knew the tension that is caused by the call of Jesus to leave everything to follow him.

Freedom does not mean heartlessness or insensitivity. He came to enhearten us so that his joy may be complete in our joy. Is looking back allowed? Are longing and loving allowed in being companions with Jesus? As followers, we are called not to live compulsively obsessed. We are invited to be dedicated not dead-icated. We watch with reverence the tender scene of Jesus kissing his mother and perhaps lingering

and looking back at his mother, whose tears begin her son's baptismal journey. She had said, "Let it be done," and now it is beginning to be done.

We are then encouraged, when it is right for each of us, to watch and listen to the ordination baptism of Jesus. He hears who he is to his Father and has his own personal prayer and discernment blessed as well. He humbly accepts both the pouring of water by John and the proclamation that he is now publicly known to be the Anointed, the Christ. He has received the gifts of the three kings at his birth. He has received his self-awareness in his own prayer. He now receives confirmation to be the beloved servant from his Father to his people.

We listen, we watch, and we reflect on his dignity, his destiny, and his own trust in both. Ignatius asks us to turn toward ourselves and reflect on our having been baptized into that same dignity, destiny, and—yes—awareness of whom each of us is. To be bathed in Christ is to be immersed in his being servant of God's people and confirmed as beloved of his Father.

In this one week of considerations, we move from tenderness to tremblingness because of the frightening dignity we receive by being one with him. We tremble as well when we consider our destiny as servants. We might find ourselves standing on the bank of the river of his baptism and wanting to check it out or talk it over with Jesus, who is accepting who he is while turning to us tenderly. Does he say, "Come on in; the water's fine?" Does he understand our timidity, our valid questions about his future and our own?

Jesus is baptized and begins taking his life very personally and seriously. Ignatius asks us to move in that direction as well. Jesus did not know where this would lead him; we do not know either, except we do know that he will lead us. Tender timidity is our sense of self as we begin to immerse ourselves into Christ.

In These or Similar Words . . .

Dear Jesus,

So many things touch me this week as I watch you. How did you ever leave home? I know how much your mother meant to you and that you lived with her in a home filled with great love. How did you hear the call from God for something more in your life? How did your "yes" feel inside when you prayed and knew you were being called to become one of us in such an intimate way?

I watch you leave home and walk off toward the river in the distance. It was so painful to leave home. You knew it was right, but that didn't make it easy. And what were you walking toward? Were you afraid of the uncertainty that faced you? Did you wonder exactly how this would all end up?

I see you on the riverbank watching John baptize the others. They are prayerful and deeply moved by these baptisms. At their baptisms, some of the people are quiet, and some are exhilarated. All of them have been moved to join with God in a new and deeper way. I see you watch their faces as they emerge, wet with water, shining with joy. Your love for each of them is so clear. You sit and pray for each of them with such a deep connection and love.

And then you join them.

You wade into the water where John is standing. He is surprised and resists, but only a word from you convinces him that this is right. He holds you and I watch as you are plunged into the darkness under the water. What is it like for you to be in that darkness, that coldness, eyes closed? With your birth you have

joined us as part of the humanity in this world. Now with this baptism, you have joined in our sinfulness. What can that possibly mean?

Then your head comes up from the darkness in the water and I see the same joy shining on your face. You throw your head back, flinging water, and laugh out loud for pure happiness. John joins you in laughing, not knowing exactly why but knowing that he loves you. You turn and walk to the riverbank toward me and pull yourself up to sit next to me. I love to look at the joy on your face. You ask me if I want to join you in the waters.

Oh, Jesus, no. I'm too afraid. I want so much to be with you, to join you in this mission of yours. But I'm not worthy. I'm not good enough. Gently, you take my hand and talk with me about my fears. What was the phrase in "For the Journey" this week? "Tender timidity." I feel the incredible strength and dignity of your presence next to me. Just because you want so much to be near me, Jesus, I feel less afraid.

What is it, Jesus, that makes me so afraid? If I take the plunge in my life, as you have, and accept this baptism, what does it mean for my life? How will my life be turned upside down? What will I have to leave that now feels so at home? Maybe what scares me most are the questions, What if I fail? and What if God is asking me to do more than I am capable of?

Still holding my hand, you ask me whether I can feel the love God has for me, the love you have for me. Yes, I can. But the fear is still there. I'm not worthy. I look into your face and see the love and friendship you have for me. I see that I am worthy just because of your love. Maybe I always think of myself as unworthy around you because it keeps me from getting too close. If I tell myself I'm not worthy to be with you, then I avoid the invitation from you that can change (and disrupt) my life. Keeping myself at a distance from you, Jesus, means that I can't hear you as clearly.

That isn't what I want. I don't want to be distant from you anymore. Over these past weeks and months I have grown so close to you. I feel the strength of your presence and know that I want to go with you, to be with you in your life, and to have you with me in mine.

Thank you for the love and friendship you give to me. Thank you for caring so much for me.

Scripture Readings

Mark 1:9–11

Matthew 3:13–17

Luke 3:21–22

John 1:26–34

Philippians 2:1–11

Romans 6:3–11