

The Spirit. . . Descending like a dove. . .
Matthew 3:13-16

The spirit descended like a dove upon Jesus. Like a dove. Why? Why like a dove? What does that mean? After all, all four gospels mention this detail, so it must have been very important. Luke pushes it a little and says, the spirit descended on Jesus in bodily form like a dove.

Like a dove? Why is that important? If you think about it, there are many parts of Jesus life that are not found in all the gospels. Matthew doesn't mention shepherds, Luke doesn't mention wise men; Mark doesn't talk about the birth at all. And John says nothing about the Sermon on the Mount recorded by Matthew and only Luke tells us about Prodigal Sons and robbers beating a man up on the road to Jericho. But all four Gospels tell us about crucifixion and resurrection. And all four Gospels tell us that Jesus is baptized. And all four mention the dove.

So, it's obviously very important. But why? You know, there are doves all around us in our Christian faith. The largest Christian recording company is called Dove Records. And go in to most any Pentecostal Church and look at many altar cloths in Methodist churches and others, and you will see a dove. On the stained glass behind me, a dove.

But I realized no one ever told me why the dove is important. Why this particular bird? The spirit could have descended like an eagle, powerful strong, majestic. Or like a sparrow, humble and a symbol of God's gracious care for the least of his creatures. Or like an owl, filled with wisdom? But, no, a dove.

Well, let's get to the baptism itself.

I've known this story since I was a child. There's John, out there at the River Jordan, baptizing the sinful folk of the region, a sign of repentance, a sign of forgiveness. And now along comes his cousin Jesus, wanting to be baptized. And the cousins get into a discussion. John says, me baptize you? No, you should baptize me.

And you can understand John's thoughts. His baptism was one of repentance, but Jesus, the perfect Son of God, did not need to repent. He was already walking the proper path, was already claimed by God.

Now, repentance. We need that every day. At Carteret Hospital there is an elevator with a keypad. And a sign: do not spray cleaner on the keypad. And every time I see it, I want to. Just because. Just because temptation to sin is ever beside us.

But Jesus, who was without sin, though tempted in every way, says, "Let's do this to fulfill all righteousness." I think it means something like this: Jesus was not going to use his unique position as the Son of God to have any special advantage for himself. He came to serve, not to be served. And so, when he could have called upon a band of angels to rescue him from the cross, he didn't. He was not going to use his special powers to his own advantage, but only for humanity.

Jesus enters fully into your life and into my life. He's not like a tourist who leaves the country and goes home when danger arises. So, he says, if humanity needs a baptism of repentance, then I am going to stand with humanity. I seek to be above no one. It is the wondrous majesty of Jesus: equal to God, he counted equality with God not as something to be held on to, but rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant. That's how Paul understood Jesus' at least, and I think this, partly, is what is going on here.

But at the same time, Jesus invites us to a deeper understanding of our baptism. He was baptized at the River Jordan, a boundary between the old life and the new. Wandering Hebrews, cross over into a new life, to be a witness. . Jesus, after his baptism, begins to fulfill his calling to proclaim the Kingdom.

As baptized folk, we know that we have crossed the boundary as well, into a new life of calling and discipleship. With Jesus, as baptized people, we go forth from here to proclaim the Kingdom according to our talents and abilities.

And, in this baptism is the promise of a new boundary, between life and death. It anticipates that when we finish our earthly journey, we cross over again, into that new eternal land of promise. So, that's tied up in our baptism as well.

And then, these words of God, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased." That's part of our baptism as well. To the extent that Jesus is baptized as a representative of humanity, that's you and me, I believe that God calls me his beloved son as well, and you as well, beloved son or daughter.

And what an insight this is. We are not here to earn God's love. It is already given. He wants what is best for us. He wants our lives to have meaning, to be filled with love and hope. God wants this for all of us.

Jesus is the beloved child of God. And so are we. And God is so well pleased with Jesus because now Jesus is beginning his ministry that will show the world the full extent of God's love. And the next time you are facing difficult and dark days, I invite you to remember that you are precious to God. You do not need to convince God to give you gifts for your journey. What

gifts God can give, He will give.

So, in baptism we know this: God forgives our sins. God claims us as his servants, to cross over into a life of serving others and proclaiming his Kingdom. In baptism is the promise as well of crossing over into eternal life when our journey is over. And, yes, tied up in all of this is the reality that we are God's beloved people. All this is made known in Jesus' baptism.

But now, what about the dove?

Scripture is careful to tell us it was like a dove the Spirit came upon Jesus . But then it doesn't tell us why. Leave the dove out of the Scripture, and it still works. But the dove is there, and I wonder why.

Is it to take us back to the very beginning of the creation story in Genesis, where as creation begins the Spirit of God broods upon the water, with the word "brood" evoking a bird protecting its nest, something doves are known for. Is this, then an image of Jesus, himself ushering in a new era of creation, of spiritual creation, a new way of God and his people to understand each other through Jesus Christ?

Or is the dove perhaps a reminder that in times of trouble, God will come to us, as in Isaiah:

38:14 I cried like a swift or thrush,

*I moaned like a mourning **dove**.*

My eyes grew weak as I looked to the heavens.

I am troubled; O Lord, come to my aid!"

Or, is the dove to remind us of Noah, again a water story. When after forty days and forty nights, it is a dove that is sent out, and returns. Returns with a promise, that life will go on. That there is no longer just the flood. There is certainly new life in Jesus, isn't there?

But then, if you remember, Noah sent that dove out again a second time, seven days later, and this time it did not return. A symbol that our life is not simply about being safe and secure, but going out and daring and risking and being God's people wherever we are?

And, speaking of that dove, that first time when he comes back to Noah with an olive branch in his mouth. Could the Gospel writers want us to look forward to an olive orchard that will be crucial in Jesus' life, an olive orchard called Gethsemane, where the Spirit of God gives Jesus the steel-strong will to remain obedient to God, even to the point of giving his life for the sake of ours. Is that why the dove?

And speaking of sacrifice, weren't doves used for sacrifices in the Old Testament? And weren't the poor people allowed to use doves instead of lambs if that was all they could afford? And didn't Jesus' own parents offer a dove when Jesus was born? Is the dove to point us again to the sacrifice of Jesus? Was it a sign for Jesus himself that his calling as the Son of God would finally be tied up in sacrifice, ultimate sacrifice?

Or maybe all of the above.

I'm not sure. And maybe that's the point. That as sure as we are of God's love for us, that we are God's beloved. As sure as we are that God gives us a new journey, yet there is something about our encounter with God that remains wondrous, mysterious. Something that we cannot tame, something we cannot fully understand.

And maybe this is why the dove. That we not take our baptism, our journey of faith lightly. That we not simply fly from one day to the next without encountering God. That we take the time to wrestle, to ponder, to reflect, on this wondrous, unsearchable mystery of God's presence in our lives. That we be humble enough to realize we do not have all the answers about life, about faith, about God.

That our faith is not reduced to dull certainty and doctrine, but leaves room for the working of the Spirit to work in our lives, to come upon us again, who knows, maybe like a dove; or perhaps in another wondrous, surprising, mysterious way. . . of God's own choosing. Amen.