

## Like a Dove

Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

There is one aspect of Jesus' baptism that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John agree upon: the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus "like a dove." Luke adds that the Holy Spirit descended upon him "in bodily form" like a dove." As a doctor maybe Luke wanted to be more physical and explicit. The Holy Spirit, the one we now call the third person of the Holy Trinity, is likened to a dove.

Most of us know the song "the Twelve Days of Christmas." In that song the present on the second day of Christmas was two turtledoves. Doves are cute, common, and therefore inexpensive. We know them as pigeons. In ancient times, they were the acceptable sacrifice of the very poor, and Mary and Joseph offered them at the Temple after Jesus' birth. Noah sent a dove out to determine if there was any dry land. Doves connote innocence and peace.

I believe the picture of the Holy Spirit coming upon him in like a dove came directly from Jesus. At the time of the baptism the Twelve disciples had not yet been chosen. According to Luke, Jesus was baptized "when all the people were baptized." I'd like to think that Jesus waited in line like everyone else. He was expressing humility. And "as he was praying" the heaven opened, the Holy Spirit descended and the original blessing of a voice told him he was beloved and the chosen one came. I believe Jesus shared the story of his baptism with the Twelve disciples sometime later.

Jesus put his experience of God into words.

Peter Jennings, the long-time host of ABC News nightly news said once that faith is one of the most difficult things to show on TV. Faith cannot be shown except by its effects. A spirit by definition is invisible. The biblical word for spirit is breath or wind. Only the effects of the wind can be seen, heard and felt, as the recent strong Santa Ana winds showed us. So a spirit must be talked about and imagined for the Holy Spirit to be real to both ourselves and those around us.

When John was in the wilderness people were very impressed by him. The people wondered if he might be "the One." John replied another who followed him was far greater because he will baptize with the Holy Spirit *and with fire*. Fire is a symbol of judgment. Jesus' baptism *will* make us choose. It will sift us. We saw and heard in the Acts passage of another baptism led by a different John, one of the original Twelve, and Peter in Samaria. There Holy Spirit came upon the new believers several days or weeks after their initial baptism. The timing isn't important. The fact that the Holy Spirit brings power and grace to believers is.

How do we talk about this thing we call faith and the Holy Spirit who inspires it?

For starters, I hope we can talk about the Holy Spirit with a smile on our face. Jesus clearly had in mind something simple, humble and personal. The Holy Spirit was not a mighty eagle or a foreboding vulture. The Holy Spirit was a simple dove, a symbol we now relate to peace. Peace is more than an absence of conflict. It's a positive quality of contentment and warmth. The smile on our faces let us and those we meet know that we are in touch with a quality that brings joy to the human condition.

I hope we can talk about the Holy Spirit as a person. I was reminded this past week that the Holy Spirit is a person—"God in three persons blessed Trinity" we sing. Person is a technical term in Christian thought. But what I mean by person is that the Holy Spirit has a personality. The Holy Spirit can be delighted, and grieved. The Holy Spirit can wash over people with great might, and speak with a still small voice. The Holy Spirit changes his or her mind. The Spirit is the part of God that takes residence with the believer.

Finally, I hope we can talk about the Holy Spirit as a presence that goes beyond the individual. The Holy Spirit invades whole communities of faith, hope and love. We usually use the word "discernment" when we speak of groups of people hearing from the Holy Spirit.

At the end the Jerusalem council where the apostles were asked if you had to keep kosher to be a good Christian, James, the brother of Jesus says, "it seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burdens." It's the "Holy Spirit and us" that tell Christians when they get together they are seeking the mind of God, not just pooling their own opinions. This is most important for this church in this season of its life. There is a Holy Presence which goes beyond the individual.

The Holy Spirit puts a smile on the face. The Holy Spirit is more than a force but a person with a personality with all that entails--feelings, change and will--and the Holy Spirit inhabits groups, not just individuals. We still must consider how the Holy Spirit works and to what end.

The Nicene Creed says the Holy Spirit is "the Lord and giver of life" and Paul says simply, "the Holy Spirit gives life." But what kind of life is it as we negotiate the ups and downs of both natural, human joy and the ordinary pain that comes with relationships, labor and age?

The voice from heaven gives us our first clue. It was a voice we're all intended to hear in our life. You are "my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." Do you and I live with a consciousness that we are God's lovely child who brings delight to the Creator? Or do we live with a constant sense of our limitations, a creeping sense of not measuring up, and that we're nothing special. Nadia Bolz-Weber says, "My yearly reminder: there is no resolution that, if kept, will make me more worthy to be loved." It's not California pop psychology to say you and I are the apple of God's eye, even, as one Christian therapist told me once, "a unique expression of God in this world." Part of the Christian life is a growing sense of our belovedness and the delight we bring to our Creator and Redeemer just as we are.

The second clue to what kind of life is it is wrapped up in Jesus. Jesus is the mirror of the Holy Spirit. At times *Jesus* got angry. At other times Jesus healed, and showed a special love of children. At other times Jesus spoke very bluntly. It's a two way street—the Holy Spirit helps us understand what Jesus was about and Jesus helps us understand what the Holy Spirit is saying in our hearts today. When you stare and ponder Jesus the Christ, the Holy Spirit grows in your life.

All these are words useless unless we try to live it in community. Your Session, deacons and I met yesterday for three hours in the annual officers' training retreat. One desire that was voiced is we want to serve more, to be a more outwardly-focused and less internally preoccupied a congregation. We want to make a difference in the community and world.

But how do 194 members of this church decide which of the many legitimate needs we should address? The 197 of us including the pastors don't even speak the same language or share all of the same culture? Our ages, energy level and availability and passions are all different.

The Holy Spirit's work is to forge consensus, to promote experimentation and risk-taking and to bring people together. Satan, Diablos means "the one who separates." The Holy Spirit both gives certainty and unity.

I believe there's a rule of two if not three in matters of outreach. If two people have an idea they should try it, and see if others join them. "Run it up the flagpole and see if anyone salutes" was the Army maxim. We need others to confirm our leading.

And we must be willing to fail. "In great attempts it's noble to fail" said one Noble prize winner in his acceptance speech. Does this town need cold weather shelter volunteers, tutors, youth workers, people visiting El Salvador, Indonesia or Pakistan? Should outreach be home or abroad? If home, only here in Redlands? The Spirit you've been given at baptism and primed at confirmation can tell us which direction to go. The Pastor Nominating Committee can take care of its business. Our job as a church—English-speaking, Indonesian and Pakistani American—in 2016 is to find the ways the Spirit is saying "go, move out." It's not enough to sit on our belovedness.

The Holy Spirit is about power and love. But before there was power and love there was a little humble dove that descended, and rested.

Thank God for God's humility to come to both his Son and you as a light, feathered bird. Because as the poet Emily Dickenson says, "hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul." Your soul was made for the precious presence of God.

Holy One, we bless you and thank you for inhabiting our lives and our world this day. Let all creation cry "Glory" for you have come to us humbly, riding on a donkey, and you have come to us humbly, as a dove. We thank you for bringing us together for worship in this new year. We thank you for the rain. We thank you for heat and a roof over our head and food on our tables. Let all the earth give thanks for your great name.

We thank you for our church leaders, deacons and elders. We thank you for our one church in three congregations, and ask for your leading in this year to come. We thank you for the opportunities to serve that await us in this community. Come, Holy Spirit, to show us how we should the others we have from you.

We pray for those you have given us to love most especially. For family members going through divorce, for other family members that are in special need. We pause now to remember their names to you:

We pray for Marcia Fagan as she attends to her mom in northern California, the Mull family as they accompany this brother and uncle in Albuquerque and . . . .

We pray that your world would know the shalom that you bring: in Syria, in northern Nigeria and Africa, in our inner cities and neighborhoods, and throughout Europe and on our borders as immigrants and refugees show up on our doorstep.

In a world of hurt and need, we thank you for your provision--grace and the Holy Spirit. Lead us into the comfort, joy and restlessness of your Spirit. It's in the name of Jesus Christ, and it's with the prayer he taught his first followers we now pray: