

SECOND READING: Matthew 3:13-17

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” 15 But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. 16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him, and he saw God’s Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from the heavens said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

This is the Word of the Lord. THANKS BE TO GOD

FIRST READING: Isaiah 42:1-9

42Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. 2He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; 3a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. 4He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

5Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: 6I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, 7to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. 8I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. 9See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

“Dove Power”

You know, Scripture is full of symbols. And that is most certainly because they help us visualize and understand complicated concepts or to see more deeply something otherwise we'd only grasp on its surface. The story of Jesus' baptism, which is described in all four gospels, incorporates several symbols. Today, let's consider two.

Of course, the most obvious one is the water...when Jesus steps into the waters of the Jordan River we remember what water does to us when we take our baths or showers. It cleanses us, and then we remember that we are living new, cleansed, forgiven lives, given us through first, Jesus' coming to be one of us, sharing our flesh and then through his giving of his life, shedding his blood on our behalf. We remember that he came to be with us and for us, to give us what belongs to him and to take on what belongs to us. As the Apostle Paul said in Rom 6, *“we, who have been baptized into Christ were baptized into his death. We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.* Water represents a clean new way in Jesus.

When we see Jesus step into the waters of the Jordan, we also remember that water is necessary for life, for lush growth. Without that molecule of 2 hydrogen and 1 oxygen atoms, nothing grows. There cannot be life. And we would quickly die, just as without Jesus we most certainly will. In Creation, God's Spirit brooded over the... waters and life began! And a thirst-quenching new life was known by God's people as they drank from the water which flowed from the rock in the desert. Water represents life, eternal life in Jesus.

When we see Jesus step into the waters of the Jordan, we can also imagine what Jesus did when he came up out of it, what a baby does after coming through the amniotic fluid of the womb, what a mother whale brings her newborn calf to the surface to do immediately after birth...that is, take a big gasp of fresh air. The waters of baptism remind us that in choosing to follow Jesus, we start life afresh leaving the old ways and old pattern of our lives behind, drowning them out to never haunt us again. Drowning them out...

Ah, yes the baptismal water too, can be a symbol of strength against adversity as well, drowning out what is evil in and around us, like when water flooded over Pharaoh's armies as Moses and the Hebrews were ready to begin their new life in the Promised Land or like when water flooded the then world as Noah and his family and animals were secure in the ark. Remember this the next time you find yourself afraid and depressed, overcome by the pain and adversity of our day. Remind yourself that you are a beloved child of God, claimed and called.

Shannon Kershner is a Presbyterian minister, but she remembers when she was fifteen and in the midst of adolescent turmoil. Her face was breaking out, her emotions were all over the place, and the mean kids at school were doing the best to totally destroy her self-image. In the midst of that soul-crushing struggle, her parents challenged her. She had been baptized as a baby, and now it was time to remember what it meant. Her mother said, "Every night as you wash up, say, as you rinse with water, 'I am God's beloved. I am baptized.' Do it three times every night before you go to sleep." So, Shannon did. 'I am God's beloved. I am baptized.' 'I am God's beloved. I am baptized. I am God's beloved. I am baptized.'"¹ At first, she felt awkward, silly, repeating this mantra, and it took a couple of weeks before it became a nighttime habit. She says that it did not stop all the bad things in her world, but as a result of that tangible act of reaffirmation and remembrance, she had one beautiful moment at the end of each day when she remembered who she really was. She was God's beloved. Hearing that voice of divine blessing each day gave her the courage to keep going and the trust that life would not always feel so difficult. It changed her."² If you would find it helpful today, I invite you to do something similar and to simply put a finger in the font as you pass by on your way to the communion Table. Remember your baptism.

Another symbol, divinely given us in the Baptism of Jesus story is the descending dove. I can imagine Jesus standing there, can't you, up to his ankles in earthly mud, soaking wet, water running down his face, tears running down his cheeks. I imagine him looking to the sky as the heavens parted (in other words, as the mystery was being made known). I imagine him closing

¹ Shannon Kershner. In: "Jesus' Baptism and Ours" by Gregory Knox Jones. <https://www.wpc.org/uploads/sermons/pdf/January8Jones2017.pdf> (accessed 1-6-23).

² Gregory Knox Jones. <https://www.wpc.org/uploads/sermons/pdf/January8Jones2017.pdf> (accessed 1-6-23).

his eyes as he prayed and then feeling the power of the Spirit descend upon him and light upon him gently as a dove. With his eyes still closed, I can see him smiling slightly as he heard the voice... *"You are my Son, the Beloved."* Any anxiety about his future must have melted away and been replaced with a deep sense of sacred purpose with this affirmation of God's presence and power with him.

Certainly those watching would have remembered another time a dove was central in a story, in Genesis when Noah, weary and beaten-down, having not only undergone the chaos of the flood, but the years of chaos that preceded it, having drifted in that Ark for what must have seemed like an eternity, found a single dove returning to him with an olive branch in its beak, an olive branch, a green and living thing, a sign that there was life out there, new life. There were growing things, safe and solid ground where he and his family could start over. That dove was evidence that God had not forgotten them, a symbol that God's promise of a fresh start would soon come to be.³

Yes, the dove is a symbol which makes clear that God's presence and power are given to humanity. It comes to us quietly, gently, often without us even really realizing it, but yet we find ourselves with a sudden calmness prior to surgery, a peace and courage when we're most nervous; we find words that we didn't know we had on our tongues when we need speak, or maybe we suddenly hear the wisdom of someone who's entered our life at just the right time. We will be empowered on our Christian journeys, equipped to use whatever gifts we possess to witness what God has done in our lives.

Baptism is then an ordination. It is anointing of the Church.⁴ For Dale Bruner, the symbol of the dove and the method of the anointing matches the character of the task that Jesus takes on and calls his followers to embody. Bruner says, *"When the church grasps even a portion of the gospel's downward and dovelike message—theologically AND ethically—the church will be in a stronger position than she is now under a frequently nationalistic and so inevitably*

³ Carla Pratt Keyes. "God's Spirit...like a dove" Matt 3:13-17" <https://asermonforeversunday.com/> (accessed 1-7-23).

⁴ Will Willimon. "January 10, 2021-Remember Your Baptism." <https://www.ministrymatters.com/att/entry/10594/january-10-2021-remember-your-baptism>.(accessed 1-7-21).

militaristic spirit. Christians are continually given power by the gift of the Spirit in baptism, but it is humble, gentle and righteous power, a dove power."⁵

Right. From this story then and from these symbols we need remember, especially today, that the Spirit continues to descend upon us. The Spirit continues to empower us to a new life, forgiven, cleansed, free, to humbly and courageously trust in God's presence, to trust that the evils which threaten us will be drown out, and to trust that we will be equipped to do Christ's loving work in the world.

Those ruling elders, who come today to be installed are responding to God's Spirit which has gently landed upon them and called them, equipped them to serve...to serve with gifts for church leadership. They have been recognized by this congregation as spiritually mature, committed to Presbyterian principles of government and as loving the Lord and his Church. They have received training and have been examined and approved by Session. They do not have "special or higher" qualities, or in ordination are being placed "above" or "better". Rather, through their ordination promises, they have grounded themselves in a posture of servitude and they pledge to support us, Christ's church, in our service of the One who stepped into the Jordan with and for us. "...just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him, and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him." Amen.

As we now sing the 1st and 3rd verses of "Baptized in water", I ask clerk, Kate Peirce-Burleson and those members who will ordained or installed to come forward.

⁵ Dale Burner. *The Christbook: Matthew 1-12*, (Nashville, TN: W Pub Group; 2007, 1987), 110.