

The Baptism of Our Lord

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Trinity Lutheran Church, Alameda

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Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

When I was a boy growing up in Michigan many eons ago, I used to lie in bed on a summer morning. The windows would be open in my bedroom and sometimes I could feel a cool breeze wafting through those windows and I could smell the sweet fragrance of the trees and bushes around our house, the fresh mown grass still dewy before the heat of the day. And in the distance I would hear again and again and again this sound:

<play song of mourning dove. [Click here.](#)¹>

It was the plaintive song of the mourning doves that greeted the day from their perches in the trees around us. They were named “mourning” doves, meaning doves who mourn, birds who are grieving. They have that name because their song sounds so sad, almost like a pleading for the return of something lost or a funeral dirge for generations of doves now departed.

I loved the sound of those doves that gently roused me from sleep, almost like a mother crooning, “Time to wake up now.”

Don't most of us love birds? Of course, not everybody loves birds. Tom Lehrer wrote and he used to perform on college campuses a ghoulish song called "Poisoning Pigeons in the Park." And of course Alfred Hitchcock crowned his film career in 1963 with his film, "The Birds," in which zillions of birds for no apparent reason begin to attack people in Bodega Bay. And nobody likes having their picnic rained on by a passing flock.

But, still, most of us do love birds. We call them our little feathered friends. They hop and skip about on the ground with their tiny, spindly little legs. We sing songs about them, “When the red red robin comes bob bob bobbin along.” They perch on tree tops and magically balance themselves on power lines and phone lines far above our heads. And they spread their wings and take off soaring high into the sky. How many of us have wanted to be a bird—at least for a little while—and fly off into the air like that? That's how the writer of Psalm 55 felt, (verse 6): “And I said, Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then I would fly away, and be at rest.”

People have always been fascinated by birds. There were Greek and Egyptian gods who took the form of birds. Ancient seers would predict the future from watching the flight of birds or by examining their entrails. (I'm not sure how successful that

¹ Birdcalls for many birds as well as copious information about all varieties are to be found at the Cornell University website, allaboutbirds.org.

was, but it was a nice try, and a measure of how much the ancients, like us, were captivated by birds.)

In view of how special and magical and fascinating birds are, it's a surprise to me how little attention is paid to the bird in this story of Jesus' baptism. You know, the four Gospels have been the objects of centuries of interpretation and reams of scholarship. You can buy an endless supply of commentaries that dissect and analyze and speculate about the meaning of every word, but I've looked at them and I find that little is said about the dove.

Partly that's because nobody can figure out why the Spirit descends from heaven like a dove, dove-like. A version of this story is found in all four gospels, and all of them have the Spirit descending like a dove. Why compare the Spirit to a bird? Why a dove?

Let me make a little side trip here. Some of you may think, "Well, it's obvious why it was a dove. It's because that is what happened and Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are just reporting the facts faithfully and accurately." The problem with that, at least in Mark's version of the story, is that he says it was Jesus who saw the heavens torn open and a dovelike Spirit descending, and presumably only Jesus heard the voice declaring, "You are my beloved Son. I take great delight in you." In Mark's version of the story, which is probably the earliest of the four, the splitting open of heaven, the Spirit's dovelike descent, and the voice from heaven, appear to be Jesus' private, personal experience. Other evangelists tell it differently, but in Mark's account it's not clear that anyone but Jesus saw or heard any of this. It's portrayed as a communication just between God and Jesus, his private vision.

If that is true then how would Mark or anyone else know anything about it? You would have to assume that Jesus later told his disciples about this personal, private experience and that they even later wrote it down. Most scholars today would say it's more likely that Mark created these details to make a theological, spiritual point. They might put the question this way, "Why does Mark have the Spirit descend on Jesus like a dove?" and when they ask it that way they are trying to figure out what

spiritual meaning Mark intended to convey by writing of the heavens torn open, the spirit descending like a dove, and a voice endorsing Jesus as God's beloved son. If you want to pursue this point further after the service, I would welcome hearing your thoughts.

But now, after that little side trip, let's get back to the baptism and why there is a dove. One explanation is that it's a reference to the Spirit or breath of God hovering over the waters, like a bird, at the beginning of the creation story in Genesis. He heard that in the Old Testament reading this morning, and that image was recalled in the Prayer of the Day. Another theory is that it's a reference to the dove in Genesis 8 that Noah sent out from the ark to see whether there was dry land and that it was OK to open and exit the ark after the great flood. We also know that birds were often associated in the ancient world not only with gods, but with kings, so maybe the dovelike descent is symbolically a sort of anointing of Jesus as king. The splitting open of the heavens suggests that the boundary between heaven and earth has been breached, that the whole cosmos is somehow open and all divisions evaporated at this moment, and when everything is open and we wait to see what divine majesty reveals itself, the divine presence appears in a dove-ish way, like a dove!

Why not as a mighty, rushing wind and flames of fire, as at Pentecost, according to the book of Acts? The contrast reminds me of that story in 1 Kings 19, where the prophet Elijah had to flee for his life to escape Queen Jezebel, who had promised to have him executed. Elijah is alone out in the wilderness in despair and looking for God to help him in his distress. According to the story he is told to go atop a mountain and wait. And this is how the story describes what happened. (I'm reading from the translation of the Jewish Publication Society.)

And, lo, the Lord passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake.

After the earthquake–fire; but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire—a soft, murmuring sound, “a still, small voice.”

In 1 Kings Elijah finds God in a soft, murmuring sound, a still, small voice. Here Jesus is baptized, he steps out of the water, and at that moment he sees a vision of the sky ripping open, a huge cosmic event, but what follows is not a hurricane force wind, not an earthquake 8 points on the Richter scale, not a blazing conflagration, a massive firestorm. Instead, it is as though the Spirit comes fluttering down to Jesus like a fragile, simple, little dove.

When you look at the Greek word for this little birdie, the word is *περιστερά*, and if you look up that word in the dictionary, it tells you the word means “dove . . . or pigeon.” The translators could as easily have translated, “and the spirit descended like a pigeon on him.” That’s because—I just learned this—doves and pigeons are in the same family of birds, and some members of that family can be called by either name. In fact in the Gospel reading two weeks ago, Mary and Joseph arrive at the Temple to offer sacrifice and Luke writes, they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons” [Luke 2:24]. And the word for pigeon used here is the same one, *περιστερά*, that is used for the bird at Jesus’ baptism. Pigeons were a poor person’s offering. If you couldn’t afford a lamb, Leviticus 12 says you could substitute a two turtledoves or a couple of pigeons.² The Spirit descended like a humble bird, the Temple currency of the poor.³

Interestingly, in his account of this story Luke goes beyond the other evangelists. He alone writes that “the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form as a dove.” Not dove-like, but in the form of an actual dove. That version became dominant, and we find that when the early Christians painted pictures of Jesus’ baptism and also when they painted pictures of the baptism of ordinary Christians like you and me, in those paintings they show an actual dove descending on Jesus or on the Christian child. So

² The Septuagint Greek translation of the Leviticus passage also uses *περιστερά* for “pigeon.”

³ It’s an English problem that we must choose between “pigeon” and “dove.” Other languages beside Greek use the same word for both, e.g. Latin *columba*, Spanish *paloma*, German, *Taube*.

it became part of the common spirituality of Christians that at everyone's baptism the Spirit descends not only like a dove, but, in imagination anyway, as a dove (or pigeon).

Which brings us to today. Today we have the privilege of participating in two actual baptisms. Chase and Kylie are going to join all the other myriads of Christians through the ages; they are going to join Jesus himself in this rite in which water is applied and solemn words are spoken and they are declared children of God, a son and a daughter in whom God takes delight, who give God pleasure, whom God loves.

At this baptism (unless by some odd coincidence) there will be no mighty rushing wind, no earthquake, no blazing fireworks. It may seem as though little or nothing has happened. But can Casey and Kylie imagine the sky opening and a gentle bird fluttering down? To imagine that is to visualize how this God in whose name we baptize is a gentle God, no more frightening than a dove released at a wedding or a pigeon stalking crumbs down by city hall. This is a God who comes not with crushing might, but with winsome beauty, a god who invites us, lures us, into the divine presence, with a still small voice, a gentle cooing.

That's what Jesus was like, one who said happiness comes to the poor, the meek, the compassionate, the peacemakers. He lived his own life that way and baptism is also a challenge to all of us to order our lives that way too.

At your baptism, Chase and Kylie, you are given a candle to light each year on this day, to remember your baptism and think about its meaning. But I'm suggesting that every day you can also listen for the birds' singing. You can watch them soar through the air, perch on a wire, flutter outside your window, listen to their chirping. Watch the pigeons in the park and remember your baptism. Think of the gentle love of God the birds act out for you, and with courage live out the life of gentleness and care and peace to which the spirit like a descending dove calls you, calls all of us, on this special day.