

**Sermon for Sunday January 8, 2023**  
**Matthew 3:13-17**

**Prayer:** May the words of my mouth and the wonderings of our minds reveal your wisdom in our time God of life and light. Amen

It might be because I hung out with Ron McConnell, a confirmed birder, for a long time or perhaps because on Friday, December 30th I took home, an origami paper crane and origami swan, from a friend's birthday party. Or maybe it's because I stumbled across a story in Joyce Rupp's book Boundless Compassion this week; about a woman who lost her best friend suddenly, and who in her sorrow, was comforted buy a tiny Hummingbird. I'm not sure why, but when I read again the story of Jesus baptism, a story I have read so many times before, this time, I noticed the dove.

The dove descending, is an especially vivid part of the gospel story, and it's reinforced visually for us here in this congregation. In our sanctuary, you if you turn your head around and look up to the only stain glass window we have, there is a dove. In every one of the gospels that describes Christ's baptism, God's Holy Spirit is said to descend on Jesus like a dove. The dove is a popular symbol for God's Holy Spirit.

Of course, the dove is not the only symbol we have for God's Spirit. In the Pentecost story, when the Spirit comes to the disciples, the Spirit comes as *wind*, like the wind that blew over the waters

when God created the heavens and the earth. The wind at Pentecost calls attention to the Holy Spirit breathing life into the Church. **Fire** is another common representation of God's Spirit. The fire that appeared on Pentecost reminds us of the burning bush through which God spoke to Moses, and the pillar of fire that led God's people through the wilderness - the symbol of fire calls attention to the strength and force of God's Spirit. And in some places the Bible says we're made to **drink** of God's Spirit. Like *water* the Spirit refreshes and cleanses us. T

Theologians and poets throughout the years have read what the Bible says about God's Spirit and have imagined the Spirit in fresh ways: as the life-giving womb of God . . . as a wind song through the trees or a secret wrapped in smoke or an inexhaustible stream . . . as a spiritual midwife or a storm that melts mountains. One image I particularly like comes from the Iona Community. The dove is too meek for their taste. They say that, in light of the disruptive and uncontrollable movements of the Spirit – a more fitting symbol may be the wild goose. I think we prairie people could get behind a wild goose.

But . . . what about the dove?

When Jesus is baptized . . . when John pulls him, dripping, from the waters of the Jordan, God's Spirit descends like a dove and alights on Jesus.

While doves are mentioned here and there throughout the scriptures, this story of the spirit descending like a dove would have brought **one** particular story to the mind of Jesus or any good Jew: the story of Noah in the book of Genesis – Noah, who was similarly dripping wet, and similarly visited by a dove.

So, let's think for a moment about the story of Noah, and what it might have been like for him to emerge from 40 days and 40 nights of torrential rain, a terrifying flood – a flood that was the culmination of so many other terrifying events. Even before the flood, *the world had become ruined*, so the scriptures say. We have no stories, no details about what was happening . . . but Genesis points to a time when every thought people had was evil. The earth was corrupt, filled with violence. 'All flesh had corrupted its ways', says Genesis. What God had made good had disintegrated somehow. The whole world had become a place of fear, a place of injustice and evil, such that God regretted having made it at all.

Imagine the weight of that – not only the chaos of the flood, but the years of chaos that proceeded it. How heavy and weary and hopeless Noah and his family must have felt as their big boat, the ark, drifted across the waters, across all they had ever known. It must have felt like the end of the world. But then *a single dove* returned to

them with an olive branch in its beak! A green and living thing. A sign that this *wasn't* the end. There was life out there: *new life*. There were *growing things*. There was a safe and solid place they could start over. *What relief* they must have felt, seeing that dove – that first evidence God had not forgotten them, and God's promise of a fresh start would come true.

As we remember our baptisms today, there is welcome, and connection and hearing once again that we are God's beloved. But, as we remember we acknowledge the floods of our lives dripping from our souls – the pain and the heaviness, the mistakes and missteps - that we need God's help to deal with. We need God to help us start over.

Just think about all the things that overwhelm people and crush us and leave us gasping for breath. Things like financial ruin . . . or cancer cells spreading . . . or remorse over mistakes we've made . . . or addiction or anger or grief. So many things can flood our hearts, our minds, our lives, and overwhelm us.

Some years ago the Christian author Anne Lamott shared her son Sam's blogpost entitled, "How I managed not to kill myself yesterday." He began by naming the pain of the holiday season – the "onslaught of commercialism and happiness (genuine or not) . . . [a] painful reminder of the things we don't feel, [Sam said, the] objects we can't afford, and missing pieces we don't have. It is an exercise in endurance and grit," and Sam was glad to have survived it - *literally*,

glad to have survived. But still he found himself exhausted, and he shared that a few days earlier he'd called the suicide prevention lifeline. It was a turn of events he found embarrassing to admit, he said, "as these thoughts are confusing and don't match up with the wonderful life I actually have in front of me. I felt guilty and ashamed, [Sam went on] and I didn't have the strength to call anybody in my regular support network of friends and loved ones." He was drowning. But the Spirit showed up like a dove and alighted on him. Sam didn't call it that; I'm calling it that: how the folks at the suicide prevention lifeline listened to Sam and helped him see that this *wasn't* the end. There was life out there – a reason to live, a place to start again.

As we hear once again the story of Jesus Baptism and consider the Holy Spirit descending like a dove, we remember those moments our hope is rekindled, even when the floodwaters are high, and we have nowhere to go. The Spirit comes to us in pulsing tremors of raw energy, or moments of serenity, or when something strikes us as funny, and we know: there's life out there. The Spirit comes to us in well-timed offers of help, or in a story that inspires us, or in a delicious meal, and we remember: the world is still beautiful. The Spirit comes to us at important moments in our lives (as in Jesus' life), and we glimpse our reason for hope – which is ultimately God's faithfulness - a love no flood can drown. With signs of that love, those promises, and life beyond what we can see, God's Spirit comes like a dove at the end of a long and terrible flood. It's a sign that God will help us to start again. Always. Amen