

THE FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD, January 10, 2010



Keep Your Eyes on the Dove

a sermon by the Rev. Warren L. Pittman

Texts: Luke 3:15-17,21-22

Most of you know that I had a “side job” back west that took up some of my “extra-parochial” time.

As one of four chaplains for the Garden Grove Police Department, I had to “ride along” on at least one shift with an officer, usually swing or graveyard, to experience “up close and personal” what a cop lives with on the street.

The idea was that we’d be better equipped to offer pastoral and spiritual support when an officer asked for it.

The officers welcomed us into their world, especially because they found us helpful when they were dealing with domestic disturbances, death notifications, and other situations in which a different sort of presence than that of an armed, uniformed individual was needed.

We didn’t have uniforms, just dark blue polo shirts, but we did wear windbreakers with CHAPLAIN plainly and boldly written across the back, which we all appreciated: we were also required to wear Kevlar vests, just in case an unhappy customer didn’t take the time to read our jackets.

One of the “perks” of the job was to attend community and police social events as guests. It was during the dinner show at one such gathering that an officer seated next to me was uniquely “honored.”

The entertainer was a magician, working his patter and illusions fairly well, until he lost control of one of his assistants. With a flourish, he produced from a jumble of scarves a white dove, which then proceeded *not* to flutter up onto his shoulder, but to take flight out over the audience.

Obvious concern for what doves can do to anything over which they are flying caused some ducking and laughing, especially as the evening was semi-formal, complete with cocktail dresses, gowns, and mostly rented tuxedos.

Much to the relief of just about everyone, the dove soon “descended” and perched – right on the head of our table-mate!

Was it, we all wondered, just a coincidence that Master Officer Patrick was well-known to the whole department as a good church-going Christian?

Though each year on this First Sunday after The Epiphany, the church listens to a Gospel reading about Jesus' Baptism, it's just this year that my story from the Police banquet is appropriate, because of the way Luke's telling of the story is a little bit different than the other three evangelists'.

Mark, "cutting to the chase" as he always does, just tells us that Jesus was baptized, and that the Spirit shows up.

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."

John doesn't even say that Jesus was baptized, but John the Baptist does make a big fuss over him: "Look everybody! That's the Lamb of God...."

Matthew is the one who has the Baptizer and the baptiz-ee haggling there in the water, John telling Jesus that he (Jesus) should baptize him (John) rather than the other way-round. It's the first argument of the many that Jesus doesn't lose, and Matthew tells us that John consents,

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Mark, John and Luke have Jesus in the spotlight all through the story. One can picture the crowd parting to let him approach, just like it's shown in all the movies, with the moment of baptism and the manifestation of the Spirit taking place with a hushed audience encompassing the tableaux there "down by the riverside."

But Luke won't let us see it that way. Did you notice the difference?

Well, you will now:

*Now **when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."***

In Luke's telling, a picture is drawn of Jesus as nothing more than a face in the crowd, one among many who came that day to listen to John, a good deal of whom then slogged into the shallows to have John wash them down.

It is only *after* "all the people were baptized," we read, "and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying," that heaven opens and the dove descends.

Here is where I picture Officer Patrick's dove fluttering around in the sky, with every eye fixed on it, with everyone waiting to see what happens next, and wondering what it all means.

And I think Luke, of all four evangelists, may have the best "take" on this story – the best version for us to hear a Word for this day, this season, and this still New Year.

We've just finished Christmas, the annual celebration of Emmanuel's coming, of the Word-made-flesh pitching a tent among us; the annual celebration of God's Great Reclamation Project for the world.

We've now put away the Nativity scenes – OK, I'm charged with getting the Mumford-Pittman collection put away this afternoon – and our eyes are no longer focused on the infant in the cattle trough.

Jesus now sort of disappears into the crowd: with only a couple of exceptions, there are no stories about him until nearly thirty years later, when he shows up at the Baptist's revival meeting.

And even then, we read on into the chapters that follow to learn how he only gradually gathers a following, a few disciples at a time.

The Word-made-flesh dwells among us, and blends in so successfully with us, that no one seems to notice him all that much, that is, until a story he tells in answer to a question, or a gesture he makes toward someone in need kindles a spark in a hearer's imagination or a bystander's heart, and they are struck with wonder, so often phrased in the stories with the question, "Who *is* this guy?"

As I listen this morning to Luke's portrayal of Jesus just there by the Jordan, a face in the crowd, I hear an invitation: an invitation to us all to pay attention to the Spirit of God – a Spirit we believe broods over all creation still, just as she did in the Genesis story – a Spirit that often alights surprisingly in life's moments, revealing the God that just seems to show up.

When we take seriously this call to pay attention, to watch for the movement of the Spirit with a vigilance as intense as those dinner guests wondering where that magician's pallid pigeon might leave its mark, we will soon come to recognize a God who is constantly present in *all* moments of our lives.

And Luke offers me another invitation: I am – we are – also encouraged by this telling of the story to be vigilant for the moments in which that Spirit – that brooding dove – alights on us; for we believe she does.

We acknowledge in each baptism we celebrate, and each time we renew our own baptisms, that we are no less "Beloved" sons and daughters of God than Jesus.

In the sacrament with which we begin our communal life of faith, we proclaim that each and all baptized are "*sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own, forever*": the communal life in faith in which we promise to follow Jesus and to carry on God's presence and work in the world – the work of preaching Good News to all, of seeking and serving Christ in all, and of striving for justice and peace for the benefit of all God's creation.

In today's Gospel we are called to watch for the moments, the occasions, in which that Brooding Dove alights on *us*, in which the Spirit calls us out, to leave her mark on us, and through us, to leave God's ever-spreading mark on the world.

Amen.