

## EPIPHANY/BAPTISM OF OUR LORD, 2017 KRLC and United

There is a dove in our Gospel lesson today; we read how the heavens were opened at the time of Jesus' baptism and the Spirit of God descended like a *dove* and rested upon him. Doves are a familiar Christian image, aren't they? They show up in Christian art, in baptismal symbols, and even on Facebook. There was a mention of a dove in a Facebook posting I saw back on December 23, written by a pastoral colleague. The post read, "Tonight my Christmas sermon became clear. You never know when the dove delivers. So excited!" This might seem a little cryptic, but I knew exactly what he meant. The dove, the Holy Spirit, had delivered; inspiration had been given for the all important Christmas sermon, to which every Pastor gives considerable thought. The picture in my mind, as I read that "the dove delivered", was that of the traditional stork delivering a new life in the form of a baby; but in this case it was the Holy Spirit Dove delivering new life in the form of inspiration for a sermon. Other colleagues had written responses to the posting like, "could you send that dove my way as soon as possible?" The Spirit Dove's deliveries are indeed welcome to all who seek inspiration of any kind.

I was thinking a bit more about doves delivering though, wondering what others, who might *not* think like a pastor, would make of this posting of my colleague's. What *could* it mean? "Dove delivers." The word "dove" has a wider application than merely to winged creatures these days. There's dove soap, of course, which also delivers.....it delivers hypoallergenic, sensitive skin cleansing, according to the advertisements. Much more importantly, there's dove *chocolates*, which I often have in a bowl at home. I like to have just that little square of dark chocolate to finish off lunch or supper. Dove chocolates deliver, too.....not only in taste, but like the dove in our Gospel lesson, they bring a message. If you haven't had a dove chocolate square, you may not know that the inside of the foil wrapping

contains a little note, somewhat like getting a fortune in your fortune cookie. The notes are generally encouraging of indulging one's self in some way....for example, "eat more chocolate" one of them says, perhaps not too surprisingly "Do something spontaneous", is another. Which are kind of mixed messages for me, since I'm sure I already eat enough chocolate, and d spontaneity doesn't always come easily to me. Ironically, some of the presumably pleasurable indulgences they encourage don't sound even a *little* appealing to me. One my least favorites is: stay up past your bedtime. I have absolutely no desire to do that—sometimes I struggle to stay up *until* my bedtime. Not so sure about the messages *those* doves are delivering, but isn't it interesting that doves and delivering messages are connected at all?

This is certainly true Scripturally. Doves deliver information, inspiration, and messages in the Bible. The most famed dove predecessor to our Gospel dove this morning is the dove in the story of Noah's Ark from Genesis. If you recall, Noah, his family, and two of every animal were putting in some long days in the ark, waiting for the flood waters to go down. Noah sent out a dove three times to determine if there was hope of dry land appearing. The first time, the dove came back empty beaked, you might say, which meant no roosting places were available. The second time, the dove came back with a fresh olive leaf in its beak, an encouraging message that tree tops were beginning to rise above the floods. The third time, the dove didn't return at all, which was the most hopeful message of all, since it indicated the dove was able to find a place to nest and live. The dove delivered.

Certainly, that dove from Genesis would have been in the mind of Christ and of his contemporaries as this event of Christ's baptism in the Jordan River took place in today's lesson. This baptism was not the same as our Christian sacrament of Holy Baptism. We may forget that baptisms of various sort were common within the ancient world, not only in the Hebraic

tradition, but also in Greek and Roman traditions, as well as others, too. A baptism was any kind of rite involving water that signified, generally, purification and cleansing. John the Baptizer was drawing huge crowds into the wilderness to the Jordan River, where he performed baptisms for the repentance of sin, where one symbolically washed away one's wrongs. While significant, this is *not* the same rite of Holy Baptism that is present in the Christian church. We'll address that in a moment. But first, Jesus comes to be baptized for repentance by John, which causes some initial confusion. Does Jesus *need* a baptism of repentance? John thinks not. But, Jesus asks John to perform the baptism anyways, to "fulfill all righteousness", he says. Jesus, like other devout Jews, wants to repent and be baptized, and in that way, he stands in solidarity with all of humanity, where sin and the need for repentance are a universal reality. By being baptized for repentance in the Jordan, Jesus takes his place among us in solidarity. But, his baptism is unique from other baptisms for repentance in regards to the aftermath. As he comes up from the water of the Jordan, the dove delivers, right? The heavens were suddenly opened to him, and the Spirit of God descends like a dove to him. And like the dove chocolate squares, and like the dove in Genesis, this dove delivers a message. A voice from heaven surrounds Jesus and presumably those nearby and says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

So, just what is it that the dove delivers? I mentioned the mixed messages I get from my dove chocolates. The dove in the story of Noah's Ark delivers at first a realistic, but gloomy assessment of weather conditions; next a more hopeful assessment; and finally, delivers the best news possible: life on the ground is again a reality. What message might we expect *this* dove in the Gospel lesson to deliver? It is far more than a message of simple cleansing, and it is in no way a mixed message. The message is one of naming and an expression of love and affirmation. Who is Jesus? "This is my Son, the Beloved" says the heavenly voice. Christ is identified as the

Messiah, the Holy Child of God, and is also declared “beloved.” Furthermore, “with Him I am well pleased”, the voice continues. Which is an affirmation of what Jesus is doing and is about to do---for it is immediately following this baptism that Jesus will first encounter Satan in the wilderness to be tempted to abandon his mission, and then to return from the wilderness and begin his ministry in earnest. This baptism is a watershed moment in Christ’s life, when the dove delivers both a sense of naming and identity, and a sense of affirmation for mission and ministry.

As I said, this baptism which Christ experienced was different from that of the usual baptism of repentance, practiced by John; likewise, our sacrament of holy baptism is also distinct from that earlier form of pre-Christian baptism. Certainly baptism still has some connotations of cleansing from sin and brokenness, where the Holy Spirit dove delivers in the way that dove soap functions. But that’s a relatively minor portion of the significance. We speak of baptism as a means of grace, as a Sacrament in which the dove delivers in similar ways to the baptism Christ experienced: the gifting of the Holy Spirit, and a message that includes naming and mission. Indeed, Christening, or naming of a child, was a crucial component of Holy Baptism, especially in earlier centuries. A child might be officially named as part of the anointing in Holy Baptism. And here’s the wondrous thing about God naming us in Baptism---the *specificity* it involves. If your child says to you, “Mama, do you love me”, and you respond, “Well, I love everyone”, is that a satisfactory answer? It’s true, perhaps, and it implies a “yes” to your child’s question, but isn’t it far, far better to say, “Yes, I love *you*, child of mine, I always wanted a child just like you!”? That’s the importance of naming in Holy Baptism. Yes, God loves everyone, whether or not they’re baptized, correct? But *in* Baptism, there’s a specificity that affirms that while God loves everyone, this is a public signification that cannot be undone that God loves

*you---specifically* you---along with everyone else. And we pray and believe that the Holy Spirit in Baptism and in life will indeed descend ---like a delivering dove---and gift you with identity and mission. Let's think about identity and mission for a moment, both individually and corporately. Your individual name is often revealing of who you are, sometimes in your given name, sometimes in a nickname. Your surname speaks something about the family to whom you belong. I came out of a Williams family and then married into the Berge family. I claim both names with a sense of gratitude and pride. In baptism, you named part of the Christian family. Whatever other names you carry, you now carry the identifier of "Christian" ---a follower of Christ, a member of His family both throughout time and space *and* within the congregational family of which you are a part. You are named, known, and valued. And that name also speaks of your mission---we are, according to Luther, to be not merely followers of Christ, but to literally be "little Christs" out among the world; bearers of the same grace, light, and passion for justice that Christ bore. Our name and our mission, individually, are gifted to us in Holy Baptism and every time we experience a renewal of our baptismal faith.

Naming and mission apply not only to individuals but also to congregations. The congregational family into which you are received in Holy Baptism *also* has a name---a name not perhaps given in the sacrament of Baptism, but a name we trust is inspired and blessed by the Holy Spirit Dove, a name which has meaning and helps to define our congregational purpose and mission. I'm giving this sermon in two congregations this morning, and each congregational name is significant, in my mind. Knife River Lutheran Church is a name that speaks volumes to me, and why? Because it places our ministry and being in the heart of this community, the heart of Knife River, which is God's particular calling to us, our duty and our joy, to be Christ's body *here*. And I honestly can think of few congregations that more enthusiastically embrace being

the heart of God in their community than this one. We are named and affirmed by the Spirit Dove. United Church of Two Harbors is also a blessed name. Because this congregation is all about being united; not merely Methodists and Presbyterians, but welcoming and uniting of a variety of backgrounds and people, centered squarely in Two Harbors and doing ministry here to the glory of God. Individually and congregationally, we are named, claimed, and given a family through Baptism.

But the dove delivers more than just the naming and mission. The dove's message is also one of affirmation and love, both in this baptism of Christ and in our own. And isn't that at least a little bit remarkable? If in Holy Baptism, the heavens open, the Spirit descends like a dove, and there is a message from God, what sort of message would we anticipate---or dread? Sure, it may not surprise us that God's message to *Christ* was one of love and affirmation, but for *us*, also? Because what message *might* we expect the dove to deliver when we see our broken lives and our broken world and we know of our guilt in adding to that brokenness of our life and of the world? If the heavens open and the dove delivers a message, might that not be a reason for anxiety? Wouldn't we fear a word of judgment? Or a lecture about where we've gone wrong? Or at least a word telling us to stop our whining, to shape up, to try harder, to cheer up, to look on the bright side?

That is the message we might expect, and this is the message we get instead: "You are my child, my beloved one, with you I am well pleased." Not a word of condemnation, or of lecture or of well-meant but misplaced cheerleading. Just simply: "You are mine. I love you. I am pleased with you." Love, acceptance, and affirmation when we may neither expect it or deserve it. That's grace. That's God. (And )

\*We will hear that message this morning as we renew our baptismal faith with water and Word. The water is from the baptismal font. The word is from Isaiah 43: "I have called you by name. You are mine, says the Lord." Out of grace, the dove delivers, and God creates us new, redeems us and declares us good. As the sign of the cross is made on your foreheads from the baptismal water, think of all the ways in which the Dove delivers for you; *and of how you are delivered by the Holy Spirit dove; delivered from sin, death, and the devil, in the words of Martin Luther.* \* It is to you that God speaks this word: "You are my child. My beloved. I always wanted a child just like you." Amen.