

Ep1C-2007: **What BAPTISM Promises –Baptism-Shaped Lives**

A Sermon by Dan Stern (Baptism of Jesus)

Isaiah 43:2; Psalm 29; Luke 3:21-22

I told you last Sunday of an end-of-year, early morning sighting of a large Swainson's hawk on the bare branches of our backyard willow, and how it seemed a harbinger of good things to come. Today we will focus our bird watching binoculars on another peace and hope-bringing winged creature, namely, the dove that represented the Holy Spirit at the time of Jesus' baptism.

I say 'at the time of', but actually, the dove appears after Jesus' baptism. The gospel of Luke doesn't give much attention to the moment of baptism itself – Luke doesn't seem to care about its exact form nor about who it was who performed it. Some who want their sacraments to have structural predictability or priestly precedent may find Luke's disinterest in these disappointing. Frederick Buechner, on the other hand, once said that the technique used for baptism matters about as much as whether you pray kneeling or standing on your head. Depending on your faith background, you might be accustomed to infant baptism, in which case, it's the parents and congregation who make the promises, or you may be partial to full immersion adult believers' baptism; you may consider baptism to be a visible sign of God's grace-filled commitment to you, or you may emphasize its necessity as an act of your own obedience to God. Fact is, Luke doesn't show much interest in such debates. For him, it's all about what happens "after the water has dried". Martin Luther apparently recommended a similar emphasis. "Baptism", said he, "Is something that's done in church one day but takes the rest of our lives to complete." And isn't it true that all the good stuff in life happen after something else? It's after we've goofed up, after we've said or done something stupid, that we decide whether or not to confess and make amends for it. We'll goof up, no question about that, just a question as to what we'll do afterwards. It's after the time that the wind and the flood and the danger have passed, that we hear God's still, small voice, and ponder our humble place on the fragile planet. It's after Christmas, at Epiphany, when the world gets the true significance of an obscure birth in a farm animal's stable. It's after Easter, at Pentecost, that the world grasps the profundity of the resurrection life. It's after baptism too, that we, like Jesus, get the chance to live baptism-shaped lives. It's not that baptism itself isn't meaningful or important. For the Psalmist and the Prophet Isaiah, passing through the rivers and across the waters is an awesome event, even a quite dangerous occasion, given that these are references made to pelting rains, raging floodwaters, winds that strip branches and unrooted trees – all things of which we in the NW can, of late, identify. But it's only afterwards, when the waters are receding, when we're already starting to dry off and get warm again, that we can catch our breath, and contemplate what has been initiated, inaugurated in us. And we can't help but give God thanks because, as was the case for Jesus, we realize that we've made it through something big, that we've transitioned to a time and place that we know we are beloved of God, and the skies are clearing, and heaven is now open to us, and the Holy Spirit, in bodily form, in a form that we can see and touch, comes to be right here with us. The embodied Spirit may come via those from the church who remembered to call us and express their concern during the storm, during a time in the hospital, during whatever kind of 'personal power outage' we happen to be enduring. By simple expressions of caring, the Holy Spirit dove brings peace and makes God's people strong. The dove, though symbolic, is not "disembodied, amorphous, ethereal, or disconnected from the things of earth" (Lundblad quote), and the people who love us; the Holy Spirit comes to us in physical, bodily form. God is incarnate; flesh and blood, skin and muscle, and either arms that embrace or wings that enfold us, saying "We are loved."

God's promises at baptism - of genuine peace, of the heavens opening to us, of the certainty that we are loved – these may sink in slowly. But the dove descends on us too. And God keeps God's promises. Do we keep ours? Do we remember the promises we made at the time of our baptism? Perhaps it was those who parented us who initially made them. Or we may have elected to put baptismal vows in our own words, preferring authenticity to doctrinal uniformity. Maybe we have yet to experience this sacrament of initiation and belonging. But in essence, when we join a church or affirm our baptisms, we all promise to grow in the faith, to follow in the way God has set before us, to show love and justice, to be, as best we know how, Christ's disciples, to worship and to enlist in the work of the local congregation on whose shores we have landed. Though after crossing through the waters of the sacrament, we are often still wet behind the ears, we make these promises, don't we, with full intent to keep them. So of course it is appropriate to ask every baptized member, "How are you planning to fulfill your baptismal vows this year? To what are you ready to say yes, and...to say no, to let go of, so there's time and space in your life for what is most appropriate for you, for the church, for God's wider purposes of which each one of you has or can have a most significant role?"

Last Sunday, I made New Year resolution recommendations to the congregation having to do with discernment and faithful use of our gifts and talents. Our current nominations team will be meeting tomorrow evening with this emphasis on gifts discernment in mind. On the very next evening, Tuesday at 6 PM, our latest Newcomer Inquiry group will be getting acquainted with each other's interests, strengths, and hopes as persons exploring the possibility of a growing connection with Broadview Church.

Meanwhile, maybe there are still a few of you who are unclear as to exactly what part you play in the life of the church. Maybe you've been under-appreciated, maybe you have a talent you'd be glad to contribute that I or others haven't thought of. Or...maybe you've been burdened with too many tasks, and need help, or the wrong kinds of tasks, and need to change your involvement priorities. If any of these speak to your current situation, now would be a great time to let us know it so we can try to assist you in making appropriate changes. To this end, our nomination team – myself, Charles, Niki, Maureen and Dennis – will be updating a list of ways we can each be of service here, and in the next several weeks and months, we'll seek out appropriately-gifted persons to do what it takes to grow, and stay vital as a Spirit-led community of faith.

Next Sunday, you'll also be given an opportunity or two to prompt this process along. I'll remind you of the various ways you might want to help, and invite you to drop a card in the offering plate with at least one thing written on it that you feel called to do in the year 2007 in service to God, the church, and our wider ministries. You may also, if you wish, join in next Sunday following refreshments on a Church Council discussion, at which you'll have a chance to briefly state three things: "One way I love my church; one thing I still long for; one thing I feel called to do."

Please note though: our individual talents will never adequately blossom in isolation from the wider circle and the common purpose. So we'll all need to familiarize ourselves with our common purpose, and be able to say succinctly why we exist here as a church. We may need to simplify our organizational structure too, and surely, to provide adequate training for future lay leaders, officers, and committee chairs. We can no longer assume people automatically know

what to do to be a well-functioning congregation. But we have good reason to be hopeful and excited about our prospects here for welcoming and nurturing a whole new generation of faithful, persons living purpose-filled, Baptism-shaped lives.

I sum up with the words of NYC's Union Seminary professor Rev. Barbara Lundblad: "Baptism ends too soon when we only focus on the moment, and forget what comes after the water has dried – a baptism-shaped life where God's Spirit dwells within our very bodies. Please pray with me: Gracious God, we thank you for breath and clay, for wind and prayer, for spirit and body. Pour out your Holy Spirit now upon us, upon and within our (own) bodies (and upon and within Christ's body, the church). Help us live in faithfulness to you long after the water has dried". Amen.