

May the words of my lips, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, you who are our Strength and Redeemer.

Today is the first Sunday after Epiphany. This Sunday is usually observed as the Baptism of Our Lord, and our readings appointed for this day reflect that theme. The gospel reading taken from the third chapter of the Gospel according to the writer we know as Luke, shares the story of Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan.

Luke tells the reader that the people had been excited by the prospect that John might be the long expected 'Messiah'. But John responds to their questions by announcing that he is not the 'Messiah' they are seeking. John tells all who will listen to him, that he was sent to help them find repentance for their sins against God's will, and to give them an outward sign of that repentance, through the waters of baptism in the Jordan River.

John goes on to tell the people present on that day, that there is one who is coming after him, who will be much greater than himself, John, John the Baptist. One, who is more powerful and mighty before the realms of heaven than John would ever be. One, who will baptize not with water, but rather with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God.

Furthermore, John says that this One, this Messiah will bring fire – the fire of God. Fire poured out in the Creator's gift of grace on all who come to believe, and upon all who has not yet accepted the gift of repentance from the Creator, and may still be seeking a relationship with the Creator.

You see, God never closes the door upon anyone who would seek repentance, or upon those who would turn from their ways of living their lives separate from the love of the Creator.

John baptized many in the waters of the Jordan River. And on this particular day, Jesus comes to the place where John has been proclaiming repentance and is baptizing those who are repentant before God.

All four of the gospel writers – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John share this narrative, each including certain details that the other three writers may have omitted. Matthew’s gospel contains the most detail of the baptism of Jesus. But this gospel makes it clear, there is no interaction between Jesus and his cousin, John the Baptizer, as John has already been placed in prison. Mark and Luke share some details, yet each offers a slightly differing way of reporting how things unfolded on that day. In the first chapter of the gospel, verses 29 to 34 of the writings attributed to the apostle John, speaks boldly of John the Baptist’s amazement at what some had been witness to on that day – “the Holy Spirit of God descending from heaven like a dove.” Take a moment here and visualize this event in your own mind. Then let’s consider the imagery of the ‘dove’, found in the Scriptures.

The image of the ‘dove’ is found in each of the four gospel narratives. A dove is often used as a symbol for the Holy Spirit, but why? Well, two major events in the Bible involve a ‘dove’ as a sign of God's Spirit being present. And these events may have led to this connection.

Following the Great Flood during Noah's time, Noah sent out a dove from the Ark. The first time, the dove returned to him, having found nowhere to land. On the second occasion, the dove returned with a freshly plucked olive leaf in its mouth.

From Genesis, chapter 8, verse 11 we read this, "And the dove came back to him in the evening, and behold, in her mouth was a freshly plucked olive leaf. Noah knew then that the waters had subsided from the earth". The third time Noah sent out a dove, it did not return, indicating to Noah that the dove had found a new home on dry land. Thus, the dove became a symbol of God's peace following His judgment of humankind's failing in the time before the Great Flood.

At the baptism of Jesus, the dove affirmed Jesus as the Messiah. Along with the voice of God, the Creator, thundering down from the sky, the dove descends from the heavens. All the accounts from the four gospels provide a clear picture of the Triune God—Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit—all three taking part in this event at the same time. Yet, each is present in that moment as a unique Person. The voice of God the Creator in the thunder, the Son of God in the physical person of Jesus the Christ, and the Holy Spirit the Dove.

In addition to these two biblical events, doves were known in the New Testament to be innocent creatures . Scripture shares this, "For [in] the midst of wolves, be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." Wisdom and innocence can reside together if we permit it to happen. In biblical times, doves were also used as sacrifice at the tabernacle and in the temple. Joseph and Mary most likely brought a dove or a pair of doves, as a sacrifice following the birth of Jesus, as a dove was prescribed as an acceptable offering for those who had little to give.

As I mentioned a moment ago, the dove can be seen as a symbol of peace. God's Spirit participated in creation in the [Genesis](#) story, and God's Spirit continues to sustain all things, and empowers all believers for Christian service, as the Holy Spirit dwells in and among us, everyday.

Though no symbol can completely represent the Spirit, the dove is often used to represent how God's Spirit's instructs our lives, as Christians.

All four of the gospel writers speak about the Spirit being present and acting throughout Jesus' life on this earth, inspiring him to forgive sin, to heal people, to proclaim the good news of God's grace and God's love for all humankind. After the Resurrection, Jesus tells his followers that he is returning to be with God, the Creator. He goes on to tell them that the Holy Spirit would come to dwell among them, to be with them and to support them in their work of bringing all people to knowledge of God's love for us.

Through the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit, Jesus' followers were blessed with a variety of gifts. What we know as the gifts of the Spirit which Jesus told them, they would receive. And, just like them, we too receive these gifts, gifts to be shared with all humankind. Our mission is to live out Christ's ministry in our own lives. We are to love one another in the way that Christ loves us. We are to be creative, to have hope for a better tomorrow even in the face of adversity, and to have joy for all that God has provided to us. The Holy Spirit is present

with and in us, in everything we have – every joy, every struggle, every experience of life which we endure, and even in our failings. The Holy Spirit is always there to hold us up, transforming us to do God’s will, giving us the grace to go forward, and the strength of purpose to love all humankind, and to do this without exception.

So, let’s return to the gospel reading from Luke we shared earlier today. Remember I indicated how John the Baptist was amazed at what some had witnessed. Remember this part, “The heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon [Jesus] in the form of a dove”? That happened! And here is the clincher. God, the Creator, voiced divine pleasure in how Jesus was revealed in that moment. “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” That also happened. All four gospel writers attest to this fact. Then, it must be truth!

In Baptism, we each have been given grace from God. Grace to live as God’s own, to share who we are, and what we have with all creation. In baptism, we are marked as Christ’s own, forever. We say those words. And we are guided from that very moment forward by the indwelling of God’s Spirit in our lives. Thanks be to Our Creator, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen