

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

“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.’”

Jesus is baptized in all four Gospels.

As you might imagine

it happens a little differently in each one.

In the version from Luke,

Jesus is baptized among a group of people

and the Spirit descends on him like a dove,

but after the fact

as he remains standing in among the crowd.

In the version from Matthew,

we have that wonderful scene where John tries to talk Jesus out of the baptism,

saying Jesus should baptize him.

In the version from John,

we just hear John relating to two of his disciples

how he knew Jesus was the Lamb of God

by the Spirit descending on him like a dove.

John doesn’t actually describe the baptism at all.

As you can see, each of these versions

are different from the version we just heard from Mark.

But they all have one thing in common,

they serve to mark the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry.

The moment when Jesus steps out from the crowd, steps ahead of John.

So, what does all of this really mean;

the descent of the Spirit in baptism

and the beginning of Jesus' ministry?

What does it mean to us?

Surely our own baptism in no way compares with our Lord's experience,
does it?

I've never seen a dove during a baptism!

Well, actually, in spite of the lack of special effects,
it compares quite directly.

Baptism is where we all begin our ministry in the church.

As we pray in the baptismal service:

"We thank you, Almighty God, for the water of baptism.

In it we are buried with Christ in his death.

By it we share in his resurrection.

Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit."

As Jesus was baptized,

so we are baptized

to become our true selves;

to be reborn into who we were always meant to be,

to begin our ministry.

Baptism is the beginning and source of all that we do in the church.

It is interesting to me that in the Gospel of Mark

the vision of the heavens opening,

the Spirit descending,

and the voice speaking

appear to be seen and heard by Jesus alone.

They are his personal experience.

A Gallup poll some years ago reported

that nearly 80% of Episcopalians report

having had some sort of mystical experience
perhaps not as dramatic as this one,
but powerful in their own lives nonetheless.

I thought 80% was an awfully high number at first.

It made me wonder.

It made me wonder a lot of things!

I wondered if God is trying to tell us something?

And more pressing,

I wondered if God is trying to tell the world something through us?

And more pressing still,

I wondered if we are actually getting the word out?

And I wondered what that word might be?

Could it be something as simple, and yet as powerful as baptism?

Through baptism we are propelled into ministry.

Ministry that changes us, and changes the world.

What does that ministry look like?

What is our call?

One place that ministry is spelled out

is in the baptismal promises, or covenant, in our prayer book.

These are the promises we make to God

in response to the radical gift of grace we have been given in the Holy Spirit.

Shortly, as we renew our baptismal covenant,

each of us will be asked to affirm that we will,

with God's help,

undertake a series of responsibilities.

We promise to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship,

in the breaking of bread and the prayers;

to persevere in resisting evil, and whenever we fall,

repent and return to the Lord;

to proclaim by word and example
the good news of God in Christ;
to seek and serve Christ in all persons,
loving your neighbor as yourself;
to strive for justice and peace among all people,
and to respect the dignity of every human being.
These are the ministries that were lived out on earth by Jesus,
were handed down and taught by the apostles,
and give shape to the new life in Christ we seek in baptism.
They are the heart and soul of what it means to be a Christian.
Over three decades ago the Anglican Consultative Council
developed and presented the Five Marks of Mission,
as a way for us, as Anglicans, to bring greater focus to our efforts
as we engage in the reconciling work of Christ in the world.

In the intervening 34 years they have gained widespread acceptance
throughout all of the Anglican Communion.

They are:

To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom.

To teach, baptize and nurture new believers.

To respond to human need by loving service.

To seek to transform unjust structures of society,

to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation.

To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation,

and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

Make no mistake;

to pursue these goals is to change the world in which we live.

To change it for the better.

As baptism changes us, so it drives us to change the world as well.

As we struggle to discern just who we are in the eyes of God,

so too we learn to see the world around us through God's eyes,
and then live out
and live into that new reality
as fully as we can.

And always with God's help.

The season of Epiphany, our season of light,
is a good time to begin the hard work of remembering
our role as a member of the Body of Christ
in God's mission to the world.

To renew the work of discerning God's will for us specifically
in this place and in this time;
individually as people of God,
together as a parish of this diocese,
and corporately as the Episcopal Church in the world.

Because regardless of whether or not you saw an actual Dove alight on you,
or whether or not you heard a voice say it,
you -- you, your own self --
are a beloved Child of God,
and with you God will be well pleased.

Hear that again.

You are a beloved Child of God,
and God is well pleased with you.

All the faults and foibles
that you may think separate you from your creator and redeemer
are nothing in the eyes of God.

They have been swept away in love; washed away in a tide of loving tears.

The forgiveness of sin that was bestowed upon us
through water and the Holy Spirit in our baptism,
has raised us to a new life of grace.

The old life is gone.

Surrounded by that grace,

may God continually grant us inquiring and discerning hearts,

the courage to will and to persevere,

a spirit to know and to love the Lord,

and the gift of perpetual joy and wonder

in all the works of the Holy One.

That is the life we live and share abundantly.

The life we invite others into.

That is the Good News we have to share!

In the name of Christ,

who leads us through the waters of baptism

into new and abundant life in him,

may we never forget this truth,

and never cease proclaiming it!

Amen.