

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

“And when Jesus had been baptized,
just as he came up from the water,
suddenly the heavens were opened to him
and he saw 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.”

In Matthew’s version of the baptism,

Jesus has decided to be baptized by John,
coming from Galilee for that purpose.

How and why he came to that decision we are not told.

It is only in Matthew’s Gospel

that John tries to talk Jesus out of it.

We are not told why Jesus felt the need for baptism.

He says to John that it is to fulfill all righteousness,

but that doesn’t really answer the question.

It is a mystery that scholars have debated for thousands of years

and have yet to resolve.

Jesus says let it be for now, and so, like John, I suppose we must.

One thing we do know about Jesus’ baptism

is that it marked the beginning of his public ministry.

But what, finally, does all of this mean to us?

Surely our own baptisms in no way compare with our Lord’s experience,
do they?

I would like you to take a moment to consider,

that maybe we have more in common with Jesus than we know.

Clearly, none of us is called to be the Lord,
the Messiah,
the Christ who reigns in glory.

But, conversely,
through our baptism,
We have all become one with the Christ,
been welcomed into the body of Christ.

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 are we baptized –
to become who we are called to be,
to begin our ministry.

What,
no dove appeared over you at your baptism;
no voice from heaven (in tones sounding a little like Charlton Heston)?

Yeah, me neither.

But then again, perhaps we were just not listening clearly.

Perhaps we were expecting it to look like a dove
and sound like Charlton Heston,
and so, we missed it when it looked and sounded
like something quite different --

and so too, like the Jews before us,
we didn't recognize it for what it really was;
a sign and a voice from God.

Or perhaps we think that because it happened to Jesus Christ,

our Lord and Savior,

it couldn't possibly happen to us,

Because he is Jesus and we are not;

we are only his lowly followers.

It is interesting that as it is related in the Gospel of Matthew,

the vision of the heavens opening,

the Spirit descending,

and the voice speaking

are seen and heard by Jesus alone.

They are his *personal* experience.

I ran across an interesting tidbit in preparing this sermon.

It's one of those things that as soon as I saw it

I knew I had to get it into a sermon somehow.

This may not be the perfect place for it, but it will do.

A Gallup poll some years ago reported

that nearly 80% of Episcopalians report

having had some sort of a mystical experience --

perhaps not as dramatic as this one,

but powerful in their own lives nonetheless.

I thought 80% was an awfully high number.

It made me think.

I wonder if God is trying to tell us something?

And a little more disconcerting,

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

And more disconcerting still,

I wonder if we're doing a good enough job of getting that message out?

Look around you.

Eight out of ten of us here today

have probably had some sort of a mystical experience.

Have we shared that experience with others?

If not, why not?

What are we afraid of?

Do we believe, or don't we?

Something to ponder,

but I digress.

We were talking about Jesus' baptism as the start of his personal ministry.

Some parts of our personal ministry

we share with all of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

And some parts of our personal ministry are ours alone,

something between us and God alone.

What am I talking about when I say personal ministry?

One place that ministry is spelled out

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

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:

to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship,

to persevere in resisting evil,

to proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ,

to seek and serve Christ in all persons,

to strive for justice and peace among all people.

These are the ministries that were shown on earth by Christ,

were taught by the apostles,

and are required of us in our baptism.

But just as Jesus' ministry was unique to him,

each one of us is called to our own unique ministry.

We are called, in fact,

to grow into the fullness of ourselves
as we were created by God to be.

Part of our life after baptism

is the struggle to discern just who we are meant to be,
to learn to see ourselves with the eyes of God.

The other part

is to then live out and live into that new reality as fully as we can
-- with God's help.

This season of Epiphany, our season of light,

is a good time to spend time remembering
our role as the Body of Christ in mission to the world.

To renew the work of discerning who God has called us to be;

individually as people of God,
together as a congregation of this diocese,
and corporately as the Episcopal Church in the world.

Because regardless of whether or not you saw the Dove alight on you,

or whether or not you heard the voice say it,
you -- you, your very own self --
are a Child of God, a beloved one,
and with you God will be well pleased.

As the forgiveness of sin has been bestowed upon us

through water and the Holy Spirit,
and we are raised to the new life of 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 joy and wonder
in all the works of the Holy One.

In the name of Christ,

who leads us through the water of baptism
into new and abundant life in him.

Amen.