

### **Call to Worship**

As Jesus was baptized by John, the Spirit descended upon him like a dove, " And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

**We gather to lift up the name of Jesus, the first-born of many beloved children; let us worship God the Divine Creator who is the Loving Parent of all.**

### **Prayer of Invocation**

**God of Presence, by your own action you have made yourself known in Jesus your beloved Son, and through him you have opened the way for us to approach your throne of grace. Come upon us by your Spirit, we pray, even as you came upon Jesus at the Jordan; and help us to receive your coming as a symbol of our own belovedness in your sight. Amen.**

### **The Word**

Mark 1:4-11 Common English Bible (CEB)

John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins.

**Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins.**

John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. **He announced, "One stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."**

About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River.

**While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."**

### **Living the Word**

Let's begin with an experiment: Everyone take a deep breath; now let it out slowly. What is that about - the pastor telling us to breathe? Aren't you thankful that no one has to tell you to take each breath? In fact in the last 10 seconds you went ahead and kept breathing on our own. Church air isn't anymore 'holy' than any other air, though it might smell or taste better than some places...and church air can become stale at times, too! But the main point for this sermon isn't about air quality, though there is a sermon on the justice issues of how we pollute the air...

This instead is a time for us to appreciate the gift of the air itself. How uniquely we have all been created, to require air and then receive it, pretty much without any effort. We accept God's gift of air without even thinking about it. More often, I think we should remember the air we breathe and be thankful.

So we move on to the gift of water...this we have to get for ourselves or at least ask for it, but we assume that it will be there for us as we want and need it. Like air, our bodies require water, though not as frequently. Like air this could be the sermon on the conservation and care of our water supplies. But like air this day isn't for that, though we accept God's gift of water without even thinking about it. More often, I think we should remember the water we drink and dunk in and be thankful.

Today we talk about Baptism: the calling of the Holy Spirit that flows to us like the air we breathe; and the water of the actual act of baptizing – in the font or flowing like a river, available whenever we need it. Baptism is about the 'river that flows by the Throne of God' and the Holy Spirit at work, in and through our lives. It is

not just a moment in time to celebrate someone as a child of God, but a moment in time of acceptance of all of the gifts God has given us – the air, the water and the knowledge that **we** are a child of God.

God freely offers us many things. When we are baptized, either as infants or when we are older. It is then that we are beginning to open and accept all of our Creator's gifts, acknowledging God as a part of our lives, and our need for that relationship in order to survive. God has already claimed us as the children of God. We, now are also claiming that we are the children of God.

When we baptize a baby we accept for them that they are indeed a child of God until a time when they are prepared, often through Confirmation classes, to accept it for themselves. When an adult has not had the opportunity to be baptized until they are grown up, they may already know and have accepted their relationship with their Creator but the act of baptism makes a public acknowledgement that they also, are ready to make known their acceptance of the title 'child of God.'

The setting of this story has many reminders that the Gospel stories are very 'earthy.' They are grounded in the real, tangible, physical, fleshy world. Just in these few verses there are references to river water, clothing made from camels, diets of bugs, the tying of shoes, a bird analogy and an interesting weather phenomenon.

Jesus came as the Son of God. We know him as a human that walked the earth and at the same time 'God on earth'; fully human, fully divine. How and why did he do that? To show us who God is and who we can be. Jesus came to mentor our living into the acceptance speech of our Baptism. Jesus passes the love of God to us.

John baptized Jesus and the Spirit descended upon him. If we examine the scene closer we find that John has already proclaimed the coming greatness of Christ before he arrives on the scene. Humbly, he states that he is not worthy to baptize Jesus. Then with the same humility Jesus joins the crowd waiting to be baptized and becomes like one of them in the same act as they are receiving.

How odd, the early Christians must have thought, that their Lord should be baptized along with the penitent sinners! Mark did not know of the doctrine of the Trinity, nor was he aware of Paul's claim that all the faithful people who are baptized are baptized into Christ's own baptism. We can look back through the layers of traditions of the building of the Christian faith and see more clearly now. All Mark knows when this Gospel was put together and all that he proclaims is Jesus the Suffering Servant, the crucified Messiah.

This is a very important tidbit of the event: the humility of John and of Jesus as they face to accept God as children of God. In that moment, God reveals the importance of what has happened by confirming the relationship of this Jesus as the Son of God. This is done by heaven splitting open, the descending of the Holy Spirit like a dove and the voice of God, one following another.

The earthiness of this story could lead us to just wonder at how believable the Divine moments really are. We may ask, for example, why the dove descended. Most of the classic images would make us think it was done gently, as a peace dove. But birds sometimes dive-bomb (for example, to protect their young!) A dive=bombing Holy Spirit would fit with the accompanying 'split open' sky.

Many of us love to sing the hymn 'Sweet, Sweet Spirit' found in our hymnal; perhaps because we prefer a 'Sweet heavenly dove' to the wild-wind/fierce flame images of the Holy Spirit. Are our baptism rituals sometimes so nice that we neglect to mention the uncomfortable implications of inviting God's Spirit to invade our lives?

The earthiness and the Spirit go together. CS Lewis once told an audience that for Christians 'spirit' is not lighter than [earthly] matter, but heavier. Spirit is the real substance of God acting in creation and redemption and final wholeness and oneness. And yet Spirit is always tied to something material – real water, real bread, grape juice, beautiful baptismal outfits for our infants... The Holy Spirit fills us in church and then drives us

from the church just as it drives Jesus from this moment in the Jordan River to the wilderness and temptations.

The imparting of the Spirit upon Jesus is fundamental for the traditions like ours, that stress God's Sanctifying Grace: the understanding that in God's unconditional love for us our Creator has made a way for us to be fulfilled in the rest of our lives by giving of ourselves to God and for others. When we recognize and accept the gift of being a child of God, we now acknowledge the Spirit working in our lives, and live that out for the rest of our days according to the call on our hearts: to love God and love one another, and all that is included in doing so.

Jesus did not receive the Spirit in order to enjoy privately its spiritual benefits, but rather in order to pass it on. The church has claimed that Jesus underwent baptism so that we might share with him in baptism and share his empowerment by the Spirit. IF this is so, we need to live with some self-denial, as Jesus did. Jesus' authority and Jesus' humility are not two different things, held together, even as a paradox. Jesus authority is the authority of the humble one and his humility is the true humility of the one to whom all authority belongs.

At the culmination of the story Jesus is declared by God to be God's Son, dearly loved and a blessing of happiness for God. Through God's claiming of Jesus, the veiled mystery of God has now been made visible and available.

Christian pastoral care listens humbly to the needs and wishes of the others. But Christian pastoral care is also given the authority to proclaim – to announce reconciliation, to require commitment and to demand justice. When John the baptizer testifies that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit, he is declaring what all of Mark's Gospel declares: that the ministry of Jesus is the beginning of the earthly understanding of the life, death and resurrection of Christ and the authority of God.

The Spirit, that is the sign of the changing of the ages, has now been poured forth on Jesus. From now on, he and those who will follow him are blessed, and stuck with the mission to speak and share God's will for all of humanity here on earth. Mark's Gospel calls us to unfamiliar territory and challenges us with the promise of the future. In this Gospel we are always moving forward, following our Lord.

The New Oxford Annotated Bible points out the "Jesus himself is baptized into the renewal movement that began before him. In part this reminds us that Jesus Christ does a new thing, but not a brand-new thing. It also reminds us that institutions, groups, movements, tend to spin off new versions of themselves. Change and innovation- often good things – are to be expected.

A blessing to John, the popular baptizer of his day, for realizing that his ministry was not the only way, yet pointed to Jesus, the way for the people. A blessing to the writers of the Gospel of Mark for realizing that not even Jesus is contained by the society of his day. The written Word had to be as timeless as Jesus, himself, to be here for us today. Indeed, he is always going ahead of us.

Our acceptance and response, can be seen in when we spread the good news of the Baptism and how we live it out; and as we live the Christian life; as we stay committed to Jesus through the remembrance of our shared baptisms; when we show our love for Jesus and for each other; and when we give of ourselves in the Baptism vows for others, that we will work together for the building of the kingdom of God within and outside of the church.

As children of God, always trying to find ways to live into that love, we need to be reminded that we are loved. After I pray, the next song we sing together is a personal reminder of God's love for each of us as the children of God. As you sing the word, hear God singing them to you.