

First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of our Lord, Year B
January 7, 2018
Mark 1:4-11

We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son of God, full of grace and truth.

Over Winter Break, our family read aloud a delightful book published in 1951 called, *Mr. Pudgins*. Maybe you've heard of it.

It's about a family with three children who can't find a babysitter and wind up with quirky Mr. Pudgins looking after the kids. He wears a tie and suspenders, he's described as roly poly, and when he's around strange things begin to happen.

In one of my favorite scenes, it's a rainy afternoon and everyone is bored.

Pete, the 4-year-old, declares he wants "Whizzle" to drink.

So, Mr. Pudgins whips up a pitcher of whizzle and the children eagerly drink two glasses each.

What happens next is wonderful.

First, Pete burps and says, "Wow!" as a reddish colored bird flies out of his mouth.

I'll read the rest of the short scene as written:

"For goodness sakes," said his sister Janey. Then she burped. It was catching.

Oops, a bird flew out of her mouth, but orange in color.

"Mine's prettier," said Janey with pride as the bird flew up and sat on Mother's new lamp.

I felt a big burp coming. I tried to hold it in and then, "Whooooeeka-burp!"

There was a green bird sitting on my finger.

He looked surprised, and so was I.

All three of us looked at Mr. Pudgins then.

He was laughing, and then it came.

The biggest burp of all and a big, red, green, and blue bird flew out.

The four birds started to fly 'round and 'round, singing as they went."

Not only did this book have us all rolling on the floor in laughter,

but this particular scene speaks to me of Spirit

and the way in which the Spirit moves in our lives.

Take this account from the gospel of Mark retelling Jesus' baptism.

In it, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove.

I've always pictured that as some sort of billowy cloud like dove floating down from the sky.

But I don't think the Holy Spirit acts like that at all, at least she doesn't in my life.

It's usually much more dramatic, closer to a bird flying out of my mouth.

Maybe not literally, but stick with me here.

Birds sometimes act erratically, dive bombing from the sky, right?

Have you even been dive bombed by a bird?

I have, once or twice, while out on a long run,

I've had a bird swoop down and graze my head for some unknown reason,

perhaps I came to close to a nest or their young.
A dive-bombing Holy Spirit fits much better the accompanying image of a “torn apart” sky.

In today’s gospel recounting the baptism of Jesus, the scene looks like this:

Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

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."

The other place in which the heavens are torn apart is at the crucifixion.

This is foreshadowing in the text which also points to the significance of this moment.

But I also love this image of the Holy Spirit erupting unexpectedly and joyfully

from the mouths of children on a rainy indoor day.

That’s how it happens, God’s spirit invades our lives

not unlike a flock of birds swirling around the living room.

While the children in the story worked carefully in the next scene

to catch and release all those birds,

they of course missed one who ended up staying and joining the family.

We can try and vacuum up, scoop up in a net, or contain the Spirit,

but once it’s set loose in our lives, she’s usually there to stay, like Whizzle the Parrot.

C.S. Lewis once said that for Christians “spirit” is not lighter than matter, but heavier.

Spirit is the real substance of God acting in creation and redemption and final reconciliation.

And spirit is always found in real, tangible materials as well;

things like real bread, water, oil, wine, baptismal gowns, flowers, and candles.

Spirit fills us in church and in prayer and then drives us from this place out into the world.

The Spirit is on the move in this place.

That has been clear from the moment I set foot on this campus

and began witnessing acts of generosity, growth, and transformation.

I see it with the increase in attendance as people are drawn here week in and week out

to be fed and nourished by this Spirit.

I see it in those who stop by during the week to pray or talk or share their burdens.

Today, we move into the season of Epiphany,

from now until Ash Wednesday we live in this time of revelation and insight.

After the birth of the Christ child, we now ponder,

will **love** be birthed in our souls or something else?

What are our intentions and hopes for the new year?

While diets, efforts to downsize, and exercise plans are often forgotten by mid-January,

I wonder how might we tend our souls

and be on the lookout for the spirit throughout this year?

How might we thoughtfully live and move in God’s Kingdom more and more

recognizing the Spirit in our midst?

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 God's Kingdom here on earth.
The Spirit that is the sign of the turning of the ages has now been poured forth on Jesus.
From now on, he and those who follow him are blessed
and stuck with an eschatological mission:
to declare and embody God's Kingdom, right here, right now.

As followers of Jesus, we are blessed and tasked with this sacred mission;
to declare and embody God's Kingdom, right here, right now.
And what does that look like?

Well, God's Kingdom is where what God wants to happen always happens
the way God wants it to happen and we are invited to step right on in.

The sacrament of baptism in which we all participate today
by renewing our own baptismal covenant
(and vowing to support Linden in his life in Christ),
is an outward and visible sign of inward and spirit-filled grace.

It is a vow and a promise.

It is our saying yes to this sacred calling,
to be followers of Christ who choose to seek the Kingdom of God here on earth.

The day Jesus himself was baptized by John in the River Jordan
something shifted in the cosmos.
When the heavens tore open, the veil between heaven and earth,
between God's Kingdom and the Kingdom on Earth was forever changed,
rent, torn asunder.

The Holy Spirit dive bombed the scene, bursting into our lives
with tremendous ferocity and power never to be the same again.

The Spirit's power in our lives can be playful
like the children with Mr. Pudgin's burping up birds of the spirit in delight
on a rainy afternoon.

Or She can catch us by surprise, overcoming us in a moment of grace
as experienced while laying hands on someone in prayer,
or breaking bread together around the table,
or watching the sunset over the water.

This is a time for revelation and insight.

After the birth of the Christ child, we now ponder,
will **love** be birthed in our souls or something else?
What are your intentions and hopes for the new year?

Let us be on the lookout for the spirit throughout this year,
in the many and varied ways in which She is made manifest
in ordinary places made holy.

Let us seek to be followers of Christ,
baptized peoples who strive to live and move more fully in God's Kingdom
recognizing the Spirit in our midst.