

Baptism of Our Lord  
Vicar Cheryl A. Korte

January 10, 2009  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29;  
Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Growing up on the farm with four brothers I often had to compete for outdoor duties like driving the farm vehicles, working in the field, or milking the cows, rather than the boring chores like laundry and housekeeping. As my brothers got older I found my responsibilities became less and less outdoors and more indoors, cleaning and picking up after my brothers and little sister. Needless to say there was plenty to do.

I remember more than once, rushing around like a lunatic, stashing things in drawers and cupboards because “company” was coming. Friday and Saturday night visits were common among our relatives and neighbors. I can still hear the sound of car doors slamming while I quickly prepared last minute details.

Perhaps John the Baptist felt the same kind of anticipation as he “prepared the Jewish people for Jesus. Since the Messiah would be very different from what everyone expected, John had to get the people ready for this radical shift.” (Maxwell, 1198). Anyone who is familiar with Mark’s Gospel may agree there is a sense of urgency. A fast paced narrative where Mark uses words like immediately, right away, at once or as soon as –which using the same Greek word appears 42 times in the Gospel of Mark. Why the sense of urgency? Why does Mark hasten us along so quickly? Maybe he wants to spread John’s anticipatory joy of the Messiah. He wants to share the Good News. After all, a special event had taken place - God became flesh and dwelt among us. Now as an adult, Jesus was coming!! Coming to save the world!!

Mark declares this Good News in clear and simple terms. Immediately, he tells us of Jesus’ ministry, marked by his baptism. It is at the river Jordan God speaks to his Son and descends on him like a dove. This is the beginning for Mark. *The urgency is not only to hear the Good News and prepare our hearts but also to recognize the importance of God’s presence throughout all of this.*

John the Baptist is introduced so that Jesus can enter the picture. John has come to prepare the way as Mark tells us. It all begins with the Spirit of God descending like a dove. Today’s Old Testament reading from Genesis which starts at the very beginning, states, “the wind of God swept over the face of the waters.” Both Hebrew and Greek use wind and Spirit interchangeably and both speak to the “presence” of God. Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph began the journey guided by the Spirit to the land promised by God, Moses led God’s people out of exile while God blew his Spirit to move the waters (Ex 15.10), pillars of cloud and fire hovered over the Ark to light the way...all the way to the Promised Land.

The Spirit is mentioned over 500 times in the Bible and 93 times as the Holy Spirit. God gives us the greatest gift when Holy Spirit anoints us through the waters of baptism. Woven throughout scripture, we find a thread embodying God's presence, similar to a breeze blanketing the world.

A good illustration of God's activity can be found in a book called "The Shack." You may have heard of it or possibly read it. I wasn't sure I wanted to read a fictional account of murder since there is enough real suffering in the world already. But eventually curiosity got the best of me.

The main character in the book is a man named Mack, who devastated from his loss, finds himself being pulled back to the shack where on a bloodstained floor, he curls up and falls deeply into another world...a world of compassion.

The author portrays God in a way that offers an echelon of peace and contemplation. Although it is a tragic story, I found this heartbreaking fact one of the lesser details left lingering in my mind after I finished reading the book. The three "persons" of God have unique but simple and subtle characteristics, which are pleasantly portrayed as kindness, respect, and insightfulness. As the Trinity interacts with Mack they begin and finish each other's sentences carrying on simultaneous conversations.

The author describes God and Jesus in such a way you may find yourself smiling or even nodding your head. I won't say any more in case you want to read the book.

However, I do want to elaborate on the author's description of the Spirit. The author refers to the Spirit as 'she,' probably because both the Hebrew and Greek word for Spirit *is* feminine. Similar reasoning follows for the usage of 'he' when speaking of God; though many are sensitive to this, the Greek *Theos* and Hebrew *Elohim* are masculine. Only Jesus walked this earth as a man. If I may suggest....regardless of our interpretation, whether feminine or masculine, we may want to remember that God is much bigger than any discussions, opinions, or resolutions we have...God cannot be restricted to a pronoun.

This sovereignty is evident in the book when the author paints a picture of the Spirit as a whimsical, opaque being who sweeps gently through a room and seems to shimmer in the light (84); a Spirit that "stops and looks deeply into Mack's eyes; then smiles as her scents ... wrap themselves around him and lift a huge weight off his shoulders. Mack suddenly feels lighter than air, almost as if he were no longer touching the ground. [The Spirit] was hugging him without hugging him, or really without even touching him" (85). Though my feet are firmly planted on the ground, I experienced a compassion, adoration, and comfort radiating through the Spirit while reading this book.

This experience is even more evident when reading the Bible. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, the presence of God can be seen, heard, and felt. From the Garden of Eden to the Garden of Gethsemane, from Jesus' baptism to his last breath on the cross, from the disciples' great commissioning to our very own baptism, the Spirit hovers... "Like a dove that hovers over her young without touching (them)" (Hermeneia, 148).

Perhaps you have known God's presence in this way. The Spirit floats, drifts, soars, and glides... in, around, and through us. The Spirit envelopes us when we get our first job and when we lose our job; the Spirit embraces us when we are born, and when we die. The Spirit is there when we are joyful and when we are sad, when we are healthy and we are sick, when we are safe and when we are not. The Spirit hovers over the children who will go to bed hungry tonight and may not wake up tomorrow, and the Spirit agonizes over the child who is being maliciously harmed. The Spirit lingers and comforts.

Life is difficult. At times seemingly impossible to endure. Jesus knows all too well this kind of pain. For instance in Mark 15 we read, "As soon as morning came, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate" This is the last time Mark uses a fast paced word.

The Good News of salvation radically shook the world in Jesus' time, and now shakes ours ...the news that changed their perspective, also changes ours. From that day on they would experience the world differently, as we do once we hear the Good News ...which, by the way Mark cannot wait to tell us" (The Message, 1808).

It is indeed a story we want to share. We may even feel the urgency to do so. As we minister to the word remember, the Spirit hovers ready to guide, protect, and encourage. The Trinity; God the Father, Almighty, Jesus Christ his only Son and the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Life-giver, who proceeds from the Father and the Son who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, now and forever (Book of Concord, 23.7).

Amen.