

## ***Where the Dove Went***

Matthew 3:13-17

Sermon by Mark Schloneger

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*Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the 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." (Matthew 3:13-17)*

"Hope" is the thing with feathers -  
That perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune without the words -  
And never stops - at all. (Emily Dickinson)

Genesis, chapter 1.

In the beginning,  
when God created the heavens and the earth,  
the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep.  
The breath/wind/spirit of God was hovering over the waters,  
when God spoke the words of creation.

Let there be light,  
    let there be day and night.  
Let there be sky.  
Let there be earth and seas,  
    and plants and trees.  
Let there be sun, let there be moon,  
    let fish and birds bloom.  
Let there be herds of cattle and creeping things,  
    wild animals and human beings.  
And it was so. And it was good.

The breath/wind/spirit of God was hovering over the waters  
from which the heavens and the earth emerged.

Hope is the thing with feathers,  
signaling the beginning of a whole new world,  
heralding the birth of what is from what is not.

Genesis, chapters 7 and 8.

In the six hundredth year of Noah's life,  
on the seventeenth day of the second month,  
the fountains of the great deep burst forth,  
the windows of the heavens were torn open,  
and waters of destruction, of anti-creation, poured forth.  
After forty days and forty nights,  
only Noah, his family and all the animals with them on the ark were left.  
Then the breath/wind/spirit of God passed over the waters,  
the fountains of the deep were closed,  
the windows of the heavens were shut,  
and the waters gradually receded from the earth.

To see if the waters has subsided enough for everyone to leave the ark,  
Noah released a dove.  
But the dove found no place to set its foot (I love how Genesis phrases this).  
Because the dove found no place to set its foot,  
it returned to the ark.  
Noah waited another seven days, and again, he set the dove free.  
This time, the dove came back to him  
with a freshly plucked olive leaf in its beak.

This is the symbol of peace, shalom, that our denomination uses in its logo.  
It was this sign – the dove carrying the olive branch --  
that told Noah that new life, a new beginning,  
were rising from the waters of God's judgment.

Noah waited seven more days, and he sent out the dove again . . .  
but this time, the dove did not return.

When Noah and his family and the animals with them got off the ark,  
God made a covenant that stretched as wide as a rainbow,  
encompassing every human being and every living creature forever.  
Never again. Never again shall floodwaters destroy all life.

"Hope" is the thing with feathers -  
alive and loose in the world.

Just like Noah, we, the readers of Genesis,  
assume that the dove finally found a safe place to set its feet,  
a place to begin a new life in God's renewed creation.  
We assume that, but we are not told that.

We're left to wonder,  
where did the dove go?

Where did it land?  
Where was it safe?  
Where did it find a place to set its foot?

Throughout the Bible, water is sometimes used as a symbol for God's blessing and redemption. But that's partly because the waters were often understood as the place of chaos, the place of anti-creation, the foe which God overcomes to bring new life.

Sometimes, we feel swept away in those waters.  
When a just-to-be-safe E.R. visit ends with a life flight for life-saving surgery.  
When a phone call interrupts Christmas Eve peace on earth  
    with all-too-real fear for tomorrow.  
When the news about immigration and impeachment and fires and drone strikes and possible war  
    is so disturbing  
    that your eight-year old daughter asks whether you think she will live till age eleven.  
Sometimes, children give voice to the anxieties we feel.  
I heard stories like these, from people like you, just this past week.  
But, maybe, it's not one specific thing.  
Maybe it's a continuation or a combination or layers upon layers of things.  
Maybe it feels like you've been swimming in swirling waters for so long,  
    that it's hard to imagine a way out.  
Or, maybe, you see others in those swirling waters,  
    and you want to do something, anything, to pull them out,  
    but you don't know where to even begin.

A flood may never again destroy all life,  
    but we are reminded constantly that the waters of chaos are still present in this world.  
And we want to be where the dove went.  
A safe place to land, to set our feet, to perch.  
A place where there is no fear, no tears, no dread, no threats, no grief, no violence, no war.  
We want a place of peace, total peace.  
A place of shalom.  
Where did the dove go?

In my mind's eye, I can see Noah releasing the dove from the ark.  
I can see that dove hovering over the waters,  
looking for a new beginning, a new home, a new creation  
I see the dove flying through space and time,  
soaring over the seas of chaos and destruction.

And I see the dove setting its feet in Exodus, chapter 14,  
when Hebrew slaves are trapped by the Red Sea on one side  
and the pursuing Egyptian army on the other.

I see Moses raising his staff and stretching out his hand over the waters,  
And I see those slaves walking between two sea walls  
to emerge on the other side as God's beloved, God's people.

But the dove continued hovering.

And I see the dove setting its feet in Joshua, chapter 3.  
The people of God had wandered in the wilderness for forty years,  
and now they stood on the threshold of the Promised Land.  
But to get to that land,  
they had to cross the Jordan River . . . at flood stage.  
I see the ark going straight into the flood,  
the ark of the covenant, carrying the law, carried by priests,  
And I see the priests' feet just touching the river's edge  
when the waters of the Jordan stop.  
All of Israel walk through the Jordan River on dry land,  
and the waters do not destroy them.  
Once again, out of the waters,  
emerges God's people.  
The law, the land, the people, with God.

And the dove continued hovering.  
Yes, it rested on judges and kings and prophets,  
mothers and widows and surely others,  
heralding the promises and power of God to the people of God . . .  
but finding no safe place to finally rest, to nest, to be fruitful and to multiply.

In a time of desperation, the prophet cried out for his people.  
"Lord, look upon us from heaven . . .  
Where is your great concern for us?  
Where is your power?  
Where is your love and compassion?  
Do not ignore us. . .  
Why don't you tear the skies open and come down?" (Isaiah 63:15, 64:1 GNT)

By now, you know where this is headed.

Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water,  
the heavens were opened, but this time,  
it was not to release the flood waters of destruction.  
This time, it was to release the Holy Spirit, descending on Jesus.  
Like a dove.

All four gospels contain the story of Jesus' baptism,

some are longer accounts, some shorter,  
some include details that are found in none of the others.  
But, on this, all four gospels agree,  
that the Spirit descended on Jesus . . . like a dove.

Admittedly, I took some liberties this morning  
in using a dove to connect all these stories –  
the creation story, the flood story, the exodus story, the story of crossing the Jordan.  
But I did that because all of those stories, and more,  
are wrapped up in Jesus' baptism like a tightly-packed biblical burrito.  
The original readers of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John would not have missed these connections.

The early church thought the baptism of Jesus  
was a much more important feast than Christmas.  
And Martin Luther said that practically all the Scriptures pointed to Jesus' baptism  
because, in it, "the Father God wanted to make the world sure  
that it ought not have any doubt about Christ."

Yet, on Wednesday morning,  
as I prepared this sermon,  
I was distracted,  
my mind was in two different places.

On one hand, of course,  
I was thinking about this story from Matthew,  
I was thinking about how Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John  
found this detail about the dove to be so important,  
and about why this detail might be important to us.  
The dove. Why the dove?

At the same time, last Wednesday morning,  
I was waiting, maybe some of you were waiting,  
for President Trump to address the country,  
to give the United States' response to Iran's response,  
to the United States' response, to Iran's response . . .  
decades and decades of violent responses between our country and Iran.

I was thinking about the dove  
as I watched eleven people stood grimly around a podium marked with the presidential seal:  
the vice president, the secretary of state, the secretary of defense, eight generals.  
All men, all white.  
In their beings, their faces, they embodied the collective will and power of the United States.

John would have prevented Jesus from being baptized, saying,

“I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?”

Let it be so now, Jesus said, it is proper for us to in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

So John consented.

Then the doors opened, and sunlight streamed in.

As the president walked to the podium,  
the Eleven around the podium parted, positioning their bodies  
to make straight the way for the commander-in-chief.

“Good morning,” he said.

“I’m pleased to inform you, the American people, should be extremely grateful and happy.

No Americans were harmed in last night’s attack. . .”

“ . . . and only minimal damage was sustained at our military bases.

Our great American forces are prepared for anything.”

When Jesus had been baptized,  
just as he came up from the water,  
suddenly the heavens were opened to him,  
and he saw the Spirit of God descending on him . . .  
like a dove, alighting on him.

And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved,  
with whom I am well pleased.”

At some point, in the midst of the dissonance I felt  
between my sermon meditation,  
and what I was watching on my computer screen,  
I began to understand that yes, these stories belong together.  
In Jesus, God has brought them together.  
Jesus enters the swirling waters of oppressive powers and violence,  
and it is from those waters that Jesus emerges,  
to be the Spirit’s perch with the Father’s blessing,  
where the dove rests and nests, to be fruitful and to multiply.

Jesus occupies the waters in which we find ourselves immersed.  
Where the nations rage and send out drones of destruction,  
Jesus sends out the dove on disciples.  
Where presidents threaten and wield the power to kill,  
Jesus embodies the power of life.

What will our future hold?  
In the swirling waters, God says,

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen one in whom I delight;  
I will put my Spirit on him,

and he will bring justice to the nations.  
He will not shout or cry out,  
or raise his voice in the streets.  
A bruised reed he will not break,  
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.  
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;  
he will not falter or be discouraged  
till he establishes justice on earth.  
In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”

This is what God the Lord says—  
the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out,  
who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it,  
who gives breath to its people,  
and life to those who walk on it:  
“I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness;  
I will take hold of your hand.  
I will keep you and will make you  
to be a covenant for the people  
and a light for the Gentiles,  
to open eyes that are blind,  
to free captives from prison  
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.  
“I am the Lord; that is my name!  
I will not yield my glory to another  
or my praise to idols.  
See, the former things have taken place,  
and new things I declare;  
before they spring into being  
I announce them to you.” (Isaiah 42:1-9, NRSV)

The dove is hovering over the waters of chaos.  
In Jesus, with Jesus, and through Jesus,  
Let there be life.  
Let there be light.  
Let there be justice and liberation,  
a new beginning, a new creation.

Immersed in the water, you rise and the waters part all around you.  
As you emerge, the Spirit descends like a dove,  
and a voice from above declares,  
“You are my priceless child; I am deeply pleased with you.”

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -  
That perches in the soul -

And sings the tune without the words –  
And never stops - at all.