

Sunday, January 9, 2011
Baptism of Our Lord
Bethesda Confirmation

Isaiah 42:1–9
Psalm 29
Acts 10:34–43
Matthew 3:13–17
Year A

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

We baptize because Jesus was baptized. I know this is not the whole of baptism's meaning, but let it ring in you today: we baptized because Jesus was baptized.

Because Jesus was pronounced as beloved child, we too are pronounced beloved children, God-pleasing children.

Because Jesus had the holy bird come down on him, we too, at baptism, with generous water poured, also have generous oil poured, also have hands of blessing extended, also have the holy bird all over us.

Who is this Spirit for? Is it for Jesus, the chosen one, the one who came to save, the one who fulfill all hopes and dreams, who is thrust into challenges to his identity by the demonic, who stays true to his identity by preaching and living repentance and the nearness of the royal rule of heaven? Yes, Jesus had the holy bird all over him.

Who is this Spirit for? Is it for those chosen by God, the one holy catholic and apostolic church that springs to life in the book of Acts and is sounded forth by bold and forthright Peter, who develops a preaching style that paves the path toward welcoming outsiders in, gushing the gospel proclamation, that leads to a fire hydrant of baptism being released? Yes, the early church through the ministry of Peter and Paul and Lydia and Priscilla and the apostles had the holy bird all over them.

This Spirit, this overpowering presence of the divine called for at baptism, at Jesus' baptism, recognized as instrumental in prompting faith, the holy agent for breaking open God's purposes for the whole world and not just a select few, is on you confirmands today and all over Bethesda. Holy bird!

I love using my hands for blessing. I love the ritual of the laying on of hands, conferring the Spirit as called pastor, special agent for blessing (it's a cool part of my job, for sure!). Today the gesture will be accompanied by speaking Isaiah's sevenfold gifts of the Spirit: *wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and fear of the Lord, joy in God's presence, now and forever*. To Seth, Amanda, Nick, Jarrett, and Mike.

Next week there will more Spirit invoking, and water dipping, and oil slathering for Greta Mary Lee. More laying on hands. The same sevenfold gifts of the Spirit prayed for. Holy bird!

Here's what I want you to see, as not only I today but parents and mentors extend their hands in blessing while the Spirit is invoked, spoken forth: while I love my job as special agent for blessing, it is really and truly the job of the church, it is the Spirited community that spreads the gifts, brings forth justice, gives breath to others, shines light on the nations. I want you to see that it is the whole church that confers the Spirit, confirms faith.

A favorite teacher of mine said the Spirit gets shared as we rub shoulders with one another, like bumping into one another in the kitchen while the shelter meal is prepared, like when Adam Marchand speaks excitedly about how big a concept GRACE is, like when mentor and mentee meet to speak about how faith anchors you in the midst of life's turbulence, like when the confirmands write about themselves and as we read we discover their hopes and joys, and that it includes finding their way here with this community called Bethesda. Holy bird.

This baptized community attracts attention as others come into contact with us, shoulder to shoulder, voices giving praise in song, bodies making a circle of prayer that invokes God to order our world by holying it, in righteousness, breaking out something new to whatever is musty, dusty, and dying.

In the Gospels, John the Baptist clears the way for something new. John the Baptizer sets the stage for what is to come. He certainly got attention when after arriving in the desert, he calls the religious establishment children of snakes, self-satisfied, comfortable in their pews. Then he speaks of the one coming after him as one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

So as we hear today, Jesus emerges from Galilee and appears on the scene. While John protests (too much), Jesus says as we hear again and again in Matthew that this act, like his birth, this baptism, like his healing, this act, like his death and resurrection, brings fulfillment, brings what's right into human time and space. Coming up out of the water, the Spirit is conferred looking like a dove and landing on Jesus. He is set for what's ahead. He is confirmed as the beloved, God-pleasing child.

We baptize because Jesus was baptized. We confer the Spirit because on Jesus the Spirit was conferred. We so want to immerse ourselves in the righteousness of God. We so want to rub shoulders with others who are full of the life that God gives and welcomes into. We look at the confirmands today as full of promise, full of life, and welcome them with all of us into this expanse of ministry in the world.

As we launch ourselves in the Epiphany season, rooting ourselves in baptism, claiming and reclaiming the Spirited life as the life we plunge ourselves into, we are equipped like the ones wearing white today. As a kind of ongoing practice for the baptized life, with the newly confirmed, we say no to all that threatens to pull us into darkness and despair and instead to come to the light, saying yes to God's winsome and wild ways.

Seth, Amanda, Nick, Jarrett, and Mike: I suspect that the five of you are surprised in some ways to find yourselves here, after a couple years with a variety of adults trying their darndest to lead you in the path of faith. Today you are wearing white albs. Today you are speaking affirmation about a life in the Spirit. Today you are rehearsing promises that your parents made for you when you came to the water. Being front and center. Giving your own witness to life, life with God.

Let me just say: may the surprises continue. Let your shoulders, your voices, your gifts, your serving, your friendships continue to be Spirit-born and Spirit led, so that the church, the community of the baptized can continue to find its way, from font to table and back into life as a special agent of blessing. Holy bird: stir up gifts today!

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