

Grace and peace dear friends from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; Amen.

Today gospel text is the narrative of Jesus's baptism; a public event that is witnessed and recorded. The text leaves no doubt and no room for error in our understanding. However, at the time of Christ, many thought John the Baptist was the Messiah. John makes it clear to the people; "I baptize with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."<sup>1</sup>

The story of Jesus's Baptism is so well known and told every year that we have stopped asking questions and simply accept the truth and necessity of this event in the life of Christ. And still, where is our curiosity and thirst for more information? If Holy Scripture can come alive and reveal the three wise men came from the land of Abraham's final grandchildren, can it also come alive at Jesus's baptism?

My dear friends in Christ, God wants to be known, but no one is asking the questions for God to answer! We have fallen into the comfort of a world filled with traditions and stories that go beyond Holy Scripture to where a Sunday sermon becomes 'just another message.' Well, that is changing and so is our understanding. We are asking the questions and God is bringing His Holy Word to life before us today, here and now in 2019, for our sake today... and for the sake of those who have not yet heard!

God is good my friends, He truly is and He loves and cares for us! He calls us to participate in a Holy relationship with Him and our brothers and sisters in the world around us. When we do and we ask for anything in His name, He will graciously and willingly provide it. So dear Lord, why a dove? In as much as we shared the biblical truth of the wise men traveling from the East to bring gifts to the newborn King; the Christ child, what is the biblical truth of the dove? But, before the explanation and epiphany of the dove; I offer some additional insight that you may not have considered.

The Holy Trinity, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the One God we celebrate, praise, worship, and give thanks to. God comes to us (descends to earth among humankind) during the fulfillment of Israel's destiny to bring forth the Messiah. God dwells within the temple on the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant. The Word of God made Flesh comes to Earth in Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Man. Today, the Holy Spirit of God also descends upon the Earth and upon our Lord. In other words, God comes to us; ***completely!***

Emanuel, God is with us. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have all come to where we are; we have done nothing. But why was the Holy Spirit seen and witnessed in the form of a dove. To answer this question is again to look back in Holy Scripture to where God has used a dove before. However, before we journey back to Genesis, consider the significance and truth about this very special little bird.

The dove is one of a few creatures in the animal kingdom that mate for life and the only creature with an advanced ability to find its way home. The dove can adapt to living conditions in almost all regions of the world except for Antarctica and the extreme desert climates (where there is little or no life). As such, the dove will travel faithfully, tirelessly, and extensively until it reaches its home. The greatest recorded distance this faithful little creature traveled to get home was an amazing 11,000 kilometers from Africa to England over 55 days.

Ok, so why a dove? My dear friends in Christ your faith has already answered the question for you and a reading from Genesis completes the story. The answer comes from Genesis because this is the first book of the Torah, the most Holy Book in the Jewish faith. The answer comes from a source that Israel has been carrying next to their heart since the beginning of their relationship with them. The answer comes from Genesis because God has been fulfilling His promises to us since the day we were drawn away from Him!

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<sup>1</sup> Luke

*“After forty days Noah opened a window he had made in the ark and sent out a raven, and it kept flying back and forth until the water had dried up from the earth. Then he sent out a dove to see if the water had receded from the surface of the ground. But the dove could find nowhere to perch because there was water over all the surface of the earth; so it returned to Noah in the ark. He reached out his hand and took the dove and brought it back to himself in the ark. He waited seven more days and again sent out the dove from the ark. When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth. He waited seven more days and sent the dove out again, **but this time it did not return to him.**”* Genesis 8: 6-12 (NSRV)

Jesus’s time on earth is to fulfill all prophecy of a Messiah, a Saviour given to redeem humankind to her loving, generous, and faithful Creator. The dove Noah sends out from the ark returns at the baptism of our Lord as a sign of the Holy Spirit. This is the very next time a dove is mentioned in the context of the guidance and care God is providing us in the world. The Holy Spirit (as represented by a dove) guides Jesus back to His rightful place at the right hand of God. When Jesus departs the earth and ascends into heaven, the Holy Spirit is given to us to ensure we will never be lost, forgotten, or left behind.

My dearest friends in Christ our Lord; the dove is offered as a sign that we are given a gift that will lead us all back to our divine and rightful home. Our current address is a place where we endure pain, suffering, and tears together. The Holy Spirit that God gives us all at Holy Baptism is God’s Word; God’s Promise that we will come home and He will personally guide us there Himself. Our home is where our friends and family are, our home is where the loved ones we lost are, our home is where all our love is resides eternally.

God created each of us for greatness, holiness, and eternal life. The death, hurt, and darkness of this world will end as our salvation has been ensured. Among our Lord’s final words to us and His final command is that we love one another because we are the Body of Christ that has been given the God’s very Holy Spirit. God has revealed to us ‘who we are’ and ‘what we are’. This is the truth of Holy Scripture and the Word of God alive today.

Truth be known, there is another power at work in our world; a tempter and deceiver that tries to tell us otherwise. Satan continues to do what he did from the beginning in Genesis and the garden; he works to ‘push us’ to act in a way that would draw us away from God. He works to plant doubt and embellishments to take away from God’s story, love, and promise.

We are weak, but God provides for all who are His. You cannot be drawn away from God (even though our actions might not always reveal the love of God for each other) because the Holy Spirit dwells within you; each of you! The love of God endures all things, all times, and all places; and God has placed that love within each of us.

This is the rest of the story my friends, the truth of Holy Scripture, and the very Good News and hope of the world to come. 2019 will be a good year in the life of Christ Lutheran Church and a great life for those who are willing to hear and accept God’s calling to grow in grace and wisdom. 2019 is the year to know God, just like Kevin who will not be surprised when he meets God, but will recognize, understand, and give thanks for the pure and complete faith that sustained him while here on earth.

The Holy Spirit continues to fulfill the Holy Word of God in Christ Lutheran Church, in her membership and in the year of our Lord – 2019! And with this precious and complete gift of love and guidance home... comes the peace that passes all understanding to keep our hearts and minds, through Jesus Christ our Lord; Amen!