

“ON THE WINGS OF A DOVE” Genesis 1:1-5 Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11

The title of this sermon is: “On the Wings of a Dove.” It alludes to the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus, “like a dove”, and to the old gospel song which says, “On the wings of a snow-white dove, he sends his pure sweet love, a sign from above, on the wings of a dove.” The dove has been adopted by the Church as a Christian symbol, representing the Holy Spirit and peace. The gift of the Holy Spirit is peaceful, not something to be grasped, but something to be accepted in humility and gentleness. The important thing is for us to prepare, to be open, ready, and willing to receive the Holy Spirit. It is not something we earn; it is not to be worked for, but only received. Jesus is eager for you and me to have his Holy Spirit, but we cannot accept it if we are unwilling truly to let God direct our lives through his spiritual presence.

The coming of the Holy Spirit is not slam-bam or zip-zap. I mean by this that it is not just a once-for-all happening. Notice what happened to Jesus immediately after his baptism and the coming of the Spirit on him. The Spirit drove him into the wilderness to be tried and tempted for forty days. Surely Jesus had

prepared for years for his ministry. Surely he had continually to pray even after his baptism. We cannot expect the Holy Spirit to make us instantly perfect. But we have got to start somewhere, and we have got to be headed in some definitive direction.

The Baptism of the Lord is our focal point on this First Sunday after Epiphany. Jesus' baptism was the first manifestation of his glory, and the coming upon him of the Holy Spirit is most important, for it is through Jesus Christ that the gift of the Holy Spirit is available to all people. Before Jesus, in the time of the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit was given to certain individuals. However, not everyone could hope to commune with God directly through the Holy Spirit. The average Hebrew had to look to the king, a prophet, or a priest in order to know God's will. But now, with the coming of Christ, the Holy Spirit is potentially available to all persons. The days of spirit-famine are ended, and the Spirit is potently active in this new era—the epoch of the Kingdom of God!

New creation is proclaimed by the gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River, and it is fascinating to note the parallels between this event and the Genesis account of God's original creation. Water, Spirit, and voice are found in both, and it is not simple coincidence. Jesus Christ is come to institute the new

creation! In the original creation, it was God's Spirit that moved and spoke and created order out of chaos. In our baptism, it is the Holy Spirit that creates a new person from the chaos of our sinful nature into an ordered life of devotion and calling. In the Genesis text a primary concern is light, for darkness was all there was before God created the light. Indeed, God is light, and he illumines our lives. Everything is total darkness without God, and the Holy Spirit is God's light living in us to teach, lead, enable, and empower.

We can quench the light of God in our lives by refusing to accept and follow the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is the initiation into the Christian faith; it is the beginning of God's work of creating us anew as followers of Jesus Christ. God's work is not over and complete in baptism, for we must allow the Holy Spirit to be working always in us to make us perfect creations in Christ. God's creation of heaven and earth was not over in six days either. God is still at work creating his perfect kingdom. A major step was taken in sending Jesus Christ to earth, and Jesus' baptism is the inauguration of a new era, the age of the Kingdom of heaven.

Did you notice how central is the Holy Spirit in all the scripture lessons we have lifted up today? Even with the focus on

baptism, it is the Holy Spirit that is emphasized. We have failed to understand what it means to talk about the Holy Spirit, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit has certainly been the subject of much wrong opinion and information. However, I am convinced that this is one area where we must learn and grow if we are ever to develop into mature spiritual persons. This is so because it is through the Holy Spirit that God works with us to make us into saints. Therefore, the rest of this sermon will actually be a discussion of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit and how it relates to our baptism and our growth in the Christian faith.

How important it is to understand that Christian baptism brings with it the gift of the Holy Spirit. Upon his baptism, Jesus received the Holy Spirit, and when we are baptized into Christ, we, too, receive the Holy Spirit. The few Ephesian disciples mentioned in Acts 19, knew nothing of the Holy Spirit, for they had only received the baptism of John. The baptism of John was baptism into moral improvement; it initiated persons into a great reform movement. The baptism of Jesus is baptism into death and resurrection, a dying to self, a recognition that by and of oneself, you can do nothing; it is a willingness to stand as a sinner in the presence of God, claiming nothing, only counting on God's love and forgiveness. The baptism of Jesus changes the center of things from self-directed effort to God-given grace! The difference

between the two kinds of baptism is the difference between someone who tried desperately to be a good person and someone who freely admitted to being a sinner. Once that admission is made, you are raised into a new kind of life in which you have power over self that you never had before. Before it, you are like Atlas trying to carry the world on your shoulders; after it, you are like one carrying a cross. What a difference! It is the difference between trying to save yourself or admitting that you are hopeless unless a Savior comes to help. The baptism of Jesus brings the gift of the Holy Spirit, for without the Holy Spirit, you don't have grace, and you are on your own. Grace is the quality of our being that results from the sanctifying energy of God acting dynamically in our life.

We cannot fence in the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not given mechanically through baptism, but is given by God to all who will receive, who are willing to let go of controlling their own lives and yield them to God. No, we cannot control the Spirit or guarantee that we can give him to another. In the Bible, some have received the Holy Spirit before their baptism. In our baptismal rite, we need to see that there is water baptism for cleansing from sin and there is the laying on of hands for the anointing with the Holy Spirit. Again, this is not mechanical but symbolic. The rite points to the truth that God has promised to

forgive us and to give us his Holy Spirit for comfort and guidance. His promise is valid, and therefore, there is no need whatsoever to repeat baptism! However, there is the constant need on our part to reaffirm our vows of devotion, of surrender, and of seeking for God's cleansing and perfecting presence. Furthermore, it is important for us to see that baptism is done within the context of the community of faith. The minister is not the only one who performs this sacrament; indeed, the whole congregation participates. The community of faith is the sphere in which the Holy Spirit is active, and we, together, help each other to grow in faith and in the knowledge of God.

The question for us this morning must be the same question asked of those Ephesian disciples by Paul, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" It is a soul-searching question, to be answered truthfully by each one of us. We will determine the answer not based on what ecstatic experience we have or have not had, but based on whether or not we are living with certainty that the power, grace, and peace of God are active in our lives.

There is no intention here to arouse guilt in anyone over what has or has not happened in your life. There is no judgmentalness, only the clear message of God that he is willing and eager to share with us fully through his Spirit. Conversion is not only a one-time occurrence, and each one of us ought to pray for more of the gift of

the Holy Spirit in our lives. Whether you have never felt it, used to feel it, or always feel it, each of us can know more perfectly the inspiration of God by confessing our own weakness and yielding our lives in allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The manifestations of the Holy Spirit are and will be more evident in our individual lives and in the communal life of our church as we become transformed by the grace of God into loving, faithful people devoted to Christ and to each other.

Let me close by quoting Thomas Merton, the late Trappist monk, who I think is one of the greatest spiritual writers of all time. “If we are called by God to holiness of life, and if holiness is beyond our natural power to achieve (which it certainly is) then it follows that God himself must give us the light, the strength, and the courage to fulfill the task he requires of us. He will certainly give us the grace we need. If we do not become saints it is because we do not avail ourselves of his gift.”

Yes, the gift of the Holy Spirit, God present with us for guidance, comfort, and strength, is available to you and me. All we have to do is to admit that we need God, that we are not able to save ourselves, not able to direct our own lives toward perfect devotion to Christ. Invite the Holy Spirit into your life anew today. Accept the gift that God so freely offers. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen