

“Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove”

Valley Presbyterian Church – January 7, 2018

1st Sunday after Epiphany / Baptism of our Lord

Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 29

Mark 1:4-11

It is difficult to believe that only two weeks have passed on the calendar since December 24, the fourth Sunday of Advent. In between then and now, we have celebrated Christmas – together as a congregation as well as among our own families and groups of friends. The old year (2017) has come to a close, while the New Year (2018) has been rung in: whether accompanied with new resolutions or not. According to the church calendar, the twelve days of Christmas have come and gone, yesterday having been the day of Epiphany, commemorating the Wise Men’s arrival at the manger; and, all of a sudden, we are telling the story this morning of Jesus’ baptism in the River Jordan. In an hour or so, all of the symbols and decorations associated with Christmas will start to come down and be put away – no more Advent candles or banners, or tree adorned with Chrismons,,and the last of the poinsettias will go.

Maybe this process has already taken place in your home: during these frigid last few days you have put back into storage your seasonal adornments and everything has returned to its proper place and rhythm. Or, maybe like at our house, that is still a work in progress. Either way, much has happened in the last two weeks: a lot for us to take in and accept, a great deal for us to process in our life of faith.

Today, as we recount the story of Jesus’ baptism, we are called to recall and reflect on our own baptism and how it joins us together, with Christ and the Holy Spirit, into God’s family. Historically, baptism has been described as a sacrament, a visible sign of God’s inward grace. Regardless of what age our baptism takes place, it comes to us as God’s gift; we simply put ourselves in the position to receive it. “Our baptism,” writes Bruce Epperly, “confirms the global, unmerited grace of revelation of God, which applies to everyone: baptized and unbaptized. Baptism reminds us that if God is for us, who can be against us?”¹

By virtue of my baptism, I am united to Christ and, through Christ, to you and, because of Christ, to all of creation. No matter how hard I try, I cannot undo that unity; we are stuck together, sharing a common identity. In baptism, we are made one with Christ and with the body of Christ, the church; and with our neighbors – the whole body of humanity that is made in God’s image. As much as we may or may not know each other, as much as we may or may not try even to avoid each other, we are united.

¹ Bruce Epperly, “The Adventurous Lectionary”

I sometimes wonder what hidden identities the people I pass on the street or see in stores might have – people who have a child with special needs, or people who have run marathons, or people who donate blood, or people who are cancer survivors. Some of these are groups that I can claim, some are not. In baptism, we become part of a people; and on this particular Sunday, we are invited to remember the identity that we hold in common: that we are created, chosen and beloved by God; and believe the when – as Mark describes it – the heavens open up, God is doing something new.²

Sometimes, it is difficult for us to acknowledge when and where God is doing something new. Even having just moved through the celebration of Christmas – together here in church as well as in our individual lives – and the beginning of a New Year, it can feel like things are just about same as they have been, and more or less always will be. When we pull the decorations out again in December, will anything really have changed?

At the onset of this New Year, and on the occasion of remembering and reaffirming our baptism, when we are joined together – stuck together – as God’s people, the church, I would like to reflect a little about what new things God might be doing in our midst. I want to remind ourselves of how connected we are with Christ and, through Christ, with God’s entire creation; how we share a common – even if sometimes hidden – identity with others in service of God’s mission in and for the world.

We might look around this morning and believe that those you see comprise the whole of the community of faith, adding in those who chose to sleep in or stay warm at home, and those who are not healthy enough to come, and those who have escaped to warmer climates. You may think that this makes us this community of faith, but that does not include dozens of preschool children, parents and families that will be here tomorrow morning; and those 100 to 150 people who come here each week to take part in evening addiction recovery and support groups; and the people who may have found the coat, the shoes, the housewares or the bedding they otherwise could not have afforded at the Pass-It-On store yesterday. It also does not include the scores of families who depend on the food we donate each month to the Chagrin Falls Park Community Center. We have not counted the people who are right now worshipping at North Church, where we provide financial and volunteer support for their meals program; nor have we added in the many thousands of people around the world who may have something to eat today because we invited Rise Against Hunger to be here in September, and because you invited your family members and neighbors to come and package meals.

These are just some of the people with whom we share a common identity: sometimes hidden, often unknown. In our baptism, and through Christ, we are united with them. When the heavens were torn open and the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a heavenly dove, it meant that the barrier between the divine and the earthly was eliminated; now, God’s family is our family; now, God’s holy activity can be seen and

² Kat Banakis, “Living by the Word” from *The Christian Century*

heard around us; now, the Spirit continues to guide who we are and what we do as the church – God’s beloved people gathered and sent.

Frank Yamada, speaking about this day of remembering Christ’s baptism and our own, reminds us that “the Spirit moves in and out of our busy lives,” saying, “there are times when I recognize the Spirit’s hovering presence beckoning all to a different order, to a new creation. As I reach for the water, I find myself trying to connect with the chaotic, life-giving and mysterious power that resides in its depths.”³

This Holy Spirit, heavenly dove has burst through the torn-apart heavens and descended to earth to reside forever in and around us; resting now, figuratively and literally, in the water. And so, when we pray for others, the Holy Spirit leads us; when we offer to share our gifts, the Holy Spirit inspires us; when we feel connected and united with others, whether through open or hidden bonds, The Holy Spirit forges them, strengthens them, and blesses them.

Baptism is a sign and symbol of God’s grace. The community of faith, of which we are all members, is held together by our common confession that God is doing something new; that the bonds by which we are united are still – even to this today – being revealed, discovered, strengthened and celebrated. Because we worship and pray together, because we freely offer our gifts, and because we courageously seek to serve God by reaching out to neighbors in need, God unites us together; in baptism, we each have spiritually been cleansed and reborn. Rising from the waters, we are claimed and beloved, united in Christ, and guided by the Holy Spirit; and thus challenged to see everyone else in God’s creation created fully in God’s image and equally beloved. If that is really true, what will we do now and in this New Year to take our baptism seriously?

Our denomination’s Book of Common Worship offers a prayer for the occasion of reaffirmation of baptism; and I now offer it to you, and to all of us, as we seek to recall and renew our faith – our response, with the Holy Spirit’s help, to God’s grace revealed and made known in Jesus Christ; the one whose birth we welcomed just two weeks ago, and with whom now, we are gathered, called beloved, and sent out to help and heal this world:

O Lord, uphold your servant by your Holy Spirit. Daily increase in him/her your gifts of grace: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence, both now and forever. Amen.

³ As quoted by Kathryn Matthews in “Sermon Seeds”