

Luke 3: 15-17,21-22

Today is the first Sunday of the Season of Epiphany. This is the concluding season of the Advent/Christmas/Epiphany cycle. **Advent** is the season of preparation for the coming of Christ into the world as one of us. **Christmas** is the season to celebrate that coming, also called the Incarnation, when God became a human being and pitched his tent among us, as the Gospel of John says. **Epiphany** is the season to reflect on all this, the season when the Wise Men come to honor the Christ Child.

During Advent, we read about John the Baptist. He was the Forerunner, the Paraclete, the one who prepared the way for Christ to begin his ministry. In Epiphany, John is back. This time he is baptizing Jesus, not just announcing his coming.

In our lesson, we find John being very specific about who is to come. He deflects the people's desire to find him to be the Messiah. And he tells them that the Messiah will be so much greater than himself, that he is not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.

Then, we skip a few verses, and we find that John has baptized everyone else. And Jesus comes to be baptized. Once he is baptized, he is praying. Then the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove, and there is a voice from heaven saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased."

Here we have the Trinity for the first time. God the Father speaking his blessing to God the Son, as God the Holy Spirit descends on him in the physical form of a dove. The problem with the idea of the Trinity is that you can't dig too deeply into it before it seems like complete nonsense. How do you have one God that is three Persons? St. Patrick used the shamrock as his example: one plant, three leaves. The plant couldn't be a shamrock without all three leaves. My personal favorite example is that of water. It comes in three forms: steam, liquid and ice. They are three very different things, and they are capable of very different uses. But, they are all H₂O.

But, this only gets us so far. The fact is that we are not going to understand very much about God. God is infinitely greater than anything our minds can comprehend. We cannot master the knowledge of God, the way we can master a field like mathematics or literature. We can only learn and learn.

But, of the three Persons, the most mysterious may be the Holy Spirit. Let's start with the original word. In Greek, it is *pneuma*. In Hebrew, it is *ruah*. In Latin, it is *anima*. What is startling about these words is that in each language, the word for Spirit is feminine. In English, of course, the word Spirit has no gender. But, it is a translation from the Greek in the NT or Hebrew in the OT. I throw in Latin because that is the language into which St. Jerome translated the whole Bible in the late 4th century.

So, we have a feminine Spirit who appears in scripture as a dove or as fire, never in human form, or any other form. It is the Holy Spirit who drives Jesus into the desert to face the temptations of the Devil right after John baptizes him. It is this Holy Spirit that blows the doors off the house where the disciples are waiting, as Jesus had commanded them.

There is a wildness to the Holy Spirit that makes us uncomfortable if we think about it too much. We have the Father, who is benevolent to his children. We have the Son, who is one of us, and represents us to the Father. Then, we have this Holy Spirit that can be a gentle dove or a roaring fire. Unpredictable. That seems to be the primary characteristic of the Holy Spirit.

I like to say that Christ dwells in us. Others will say that it is the Holy Spirit that dwells in us. Personally, I don't think it matters as to which Person of the Trinity is doing the dwelling. God dwells in us. God inspires us (there is the word Spirit: inspire, expire, respire, aspire). God feeds us. God encourages us (gives us courage). God strengthens us. God hears our prayers. God weeps when we weep and rejoices when we rejoice. God's love for us is infinite and aggressive.

So, again, for me, it doesn't matter which Person is doing what. What matters is that our relationship with God is the most important thing in our lives. We recognize how important that relationship is when we celebrate Holy Communion or a baptism.

So, as we join that great cloud of witnesses in receiving the elements this morning, let's be grateful to God for all God does for us, and with us, and through us in the world. Perhaps, as we take the bread and the juice, symbols of Christ's body and blood, we might feel the presence of God as a dove, gently settling on our shoulder, giving us an even stronger sense of God's presence among us and within us this morning.

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Rev. Walt Westbrook