

Year C, Baptism of Jesus

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Acts 8:14-17 and Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The Form of a Dove

Have you ever wanted something really strongly? When I was a kid at Christmas I generated a list of things I strongly wanted. I spent hours looking through the Sears and Roebuck and Montgomery Ward Christmas catalogue thinking through what I wanted. Knowing there were limits to what I should expect I carefully weighed how much pleasure each item would yield. How quickly would I tire of that toy or how soon could I employ it considering we were entering our long Nebraska winter? Desire was complex and linked to the catalogue pictures as they came to life in my imagination.

Jumping fifty years and into my late 50's I remember seeing the new 2003 Honda Element for the first time. It's blocky, quirky shape with the two tone color paint combination and the double doors on the side captured my imagination. In my mind here was a cross between a pickup with a cab and a sedan that made sense. The only problem, should I ever get one, was winning wife approval. She wasn't as given to novelty in vehicles as I was. How could I get her to agree with my desire?

By now you are wondering how in the world I am going to relate this to any of the Biblical passages we just read. Reading from the Acts passage it says, "When word reached the apostles in Jerusalem that Samaria had accepted God's word, they commissioned Peter and John to go to Samaria." The Jerusalem church leaders got word that the Samaritans, those half-bred Jews north of Jerusalem, had welcomed the message about Jesus. To use the metaphor above, they hadn't decided to buy anything from the Christmas catalogue yet but they were looking through it. It was beginning to form their desires. To move them along in their process, the leaders sent Peter and John down to Samaria where they hoped the new believers would deepen their desire to follow Jesus and take into themselves the full measure of what the gospel offers. They wanted the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit and the particular Greek word Luke uses to express this means "to grasp, take in, seize onto, and take hold of." To make it way crasser than how Luke would put it, they wanted them to not just look at the catalogue but actually buy items from it.

Luke now throws in an explanation. "This was because the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen on any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus." The Samaritans were open to hearing what the gospel had to say but had not yet decided to grasp onto it. They had not yet sent an order to Sears and Roebuck requesting items be sent them that would profoundly enrich their lives. They were on the mailing list but nothing more. They had passively signed up but a sense of excitement, challenge, possibility, newness that goes in deep and animates from the center "had not yet fallen on any of them."

So it seems the Holy Spirit “falls on us.” For it to fall on us it must come from above. Where does desire come from? Girard says desire comes from the other, like the Christmas catalogue in my case. We want what those smiling children in the catalogue want as they play with their new erector set. The fact that we can see they want it shows us that it is worth wanting.

These desires are totally normal and come from those around us or those we see in the catalogue. Now here is the point I am leading to. This Holy Spirit business doesn’t come from the same place at all—it gets dropped from above. It comes from a different direction. It has a different source. Because of this, its presence in our lives changes us and moves us in a new direction. Isn’t there a song with the lyrics “We’re moving in a new direction?”

Could it be that when Peter and John laid their hands on these Samaritan half-breeds, the Samaritans were invaded by a new set of desires? Maybe that’s too strong. Maybe it was just a beachhead that was cleared where new desires could take hold. Or maybe the beachhead image is too violent to describe the way God actually works, since it connotes D Day and the Normandy Beach.

Maybe a better image would be a seed got sown and this seed contained an utterly different set of DNA instructions than any sown in the Samaritans before. Soon we will talk about the precise nature of this DNA. For now I want to play with this image a little more.

Because we are human we can’t help but be open to seeding; to having desires sown in us. It will be either seeds from above or seeds blown in from our neighbors, our heritage and our culture that get sown. If you live in Nebraska you will likely share in its values though you may not know it. But if you are from Alabama you will be able to see it in Nebraskans. The only way we can see differently is when desires come from a different place. The source of the seed is critically important.

Prior to Peter and John’s coming, the Samaritans had been baptized in Jesus name but a redirection of desire had not yet fallen on a single one of them. But this was about to change. Peter and John’s blessing hands laid upon them become conduits through which new desires move. The Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit. The word “receive” here means “grasped onto and were grasped by,” the same Greek word as before.

I want now to shift to Luke 3 where Jesus is baptized and the Holy Spirit falls on him. The text reads, “When everyone was being baptized, Jesus also was baptized.” Luke seems to be saying Jesus is just like us. His identification with us is total and all-in. Luke goes on. “While he was praying, heaven was opened.” In Jesus’ prayer Jesus is opening himself up to God’s desire. He wants what God wants. Prayer is his method for inviting God in. He is not telling God what he wants God to do; like me reading my Christmas wish list. He is making himself available to be influenced from above. “God, I open myself to you. I desire your desire.” Jesus provides us here with a model on how to pray.

Again, “While he was praying, heaven was opened.” Now we know where the Spirit comes from. The Spirit comes from heaven—that place outside all the rivalry pressures and all obligations “oughts” that cloud our thinking and confuse our action. Heaven was open and

there was nothing to impede the flow of God's desire toward Jesus. Jesus' desire is open toward God, ready to take in God's desire and God's desire reaches down from beyond human entanglement and meets Jesus. The text describes it as The Holy Spirit.

"The Holy Spirit came down on Jesus in bodily form like a dove." What is this spirit that came down on Jesus like? We are given a single hint. It has the form of a dove! What is a dove like? What comes to your mind? (At this point I opened it to response from the congregation—a small group of 30. Words such as gentle, harmless, defenseless, a symbol of peace, a bringer of hope to Noah as he sailed on the waters of human violence, a soft voice that does not rankle, communal, and not aggressive got expressed. I then asked what if the Holy Spirit came in the form of an eagle, a sparrow, an owl, or a vulture. How would that change our understanding of the Holy Spirit?)

After the Holy Spirit came down in bodily form like a dove, "there was a voice from heaven that said, "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness." We parents know about loving our children. Often our hearts ache for them when their lives turn soar or evolve in ways we fear will diminish them. But here is a Father whose son brings him great happiness. The Son is totally attuned to the Father. The two of them together have set out to communicate a new understanding of love and God and God's desire for peace with all human kind. Their desire will take Jesus to the cross as the only way to break through our human intoxication with greed, rivalry and violence. May we continue our detox and open ourselves more and more to the Holy Spirit that comes from above in the form of a dove. Amen.