

Baptismal Epiphany – Niquita Hohm

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

The beginning of our scripture paints such an incredible scene for us. And it can be imagined in so many ways. Some imagine the Spirit of God fluttering, shimmying, dancing over the waters. (Although I'm guessing earlier Free Methodists didn't favor that particular imagery.) Debbie Blue, in her *Consider the Birds*, explores how ancient rabbis imagined that Spirit as a bird, and in particular as a dove. But this image resonates in different ways depending on how one imagines the waters over which this bird is hovering. She notes that "a giant powerful bird is a more likely character to take on the void. What chance would a dove have with the deep and the dark? It has a small brain, stubby little legs—it is easy picking for predators."

Debbie Blue goes on to explain that dove and pigeon are actually interchangeable names for the same bird. She highlights how comical that is, especially when the dove has become this tame, meek and mild image of purity in Christianity. Maybe you have that sort of a sterile, Hallmark card image in your head of the dove descending upon Jesus in his baptism. Pigeons, on the other hand, are the birds we get annoyed at and shoo away when we want to sit on a park bench. There are a number of birds who want to avoid us, to be out in the wild, but pigeons seem to want proximity to us, to be in all our spaces with us. They won't leave us alone. Blue questions: "What if the spirit of God descends like a pigeon, somehow—always underfoot, routinely ignored, often despised?"

This relentless Spirit comes to us again in our Psalm. We even get *the voice of the Lord over mighty waters*, drawing us back to the chaotic cosmic waters of the beginning and reminding us of God's constant presence to us through creation.

There's an important pattern happening here in this Psalm as well. We start with a naming. Jordan and I are increasingly realizing the pressure and the gift of this naming responsibility. There is a call to name the glory that belongs only to the Lord of all creation. There is also naming as the voice of the Lord echoes out over land and sea. In these namings there is changed relationship. *May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!* This Psalm clearly sets up God's holy transcendence, and as we respond in worship, we are opened to recognizing the strength and peace God offers God's people. Living into that changed relationship of worship and dependence will change our reality.

God's revelation comes to us both in the loud and cosmic, as our Psalm and Genesis demonstrate, and through the intimate and personal, as it does with Jesus.

As we make our way to the gospel and wander into the wilderness, we are again surrounded by water. But this isn't just any body of water. It is the site of great water crossings of Israel's history. This isn't just setting the stage for Mark's gospel, it is tying together the hopes and longings of a whole people throughout their history. Mark usually rushes from one thing to the next. No birth narrative for us here, he just plops us down into the wilderness. *Immediately* is one of his favorite words, and he would rather get all the action in than include much dialogue or extra detail. So, the fact that he slows down enough to include details of John the Baptist's

strange wardrobe is significant. He clearly desires to show John's continuing in the prophetic tradition of Elijah, who was John's style inspiration, and the other forerunner prophets.

And here again with Jesus, we have a naming and a transformed relationship that transforms reality. As the heavens tear open to name the Beloved Son, Jesus is set on his path of ministry and mission. He goes down into the chaotic waters in solidarity with us, those whom he came to save, and rises again hearing the unconditional love and acceptance of Belovedness, bringing us along to receive the same gift.

In Acts, Paul calls believers to receive this same gift. They receive this gift of the Spirit in order to speak God's name on behalf of the work God is doing in the world. Thinking about the way the Spirit of God spread so voraciously through early Christian communities gives a more concrete visual to the wind of God sweeping over the face of the deep, or to the less conventional imagery of swarms of pigeons swooping in and setting up camp too close to us for comfort. God, who hovered over the face of the deep, and formed the waters, and shaped day and night, who played in the dirt, desires to pull us up out of the watery womb of our baptismal waters, shaping and molding us into that new identity of Beloved children, proclaiming the kingdom.

Yesterday was **Epiphany**. I miss the rich traditions surrounding Epiphany I got to learn about at the Latino church I attended the past couple years. My favorite was when we gathered together after the service to cut into this delicious pastry, the *rosca de reyes*, or King's cake, everyone checking to see if you were the lucky winner with the little baby Jesus figurine in your slice and therefore the lucky one who got to host everyone at your home for a party. This round cake symbolizes the infinite love of God, the baby Jesus inside represents his hiding from Herod, and the colorful fruit pieces on top are the jewels in the crowns of the Magi. Being invited into this sweet tradition made Epiphany stand out to me in a new way, as a time to look for new, and maybe hidden appearances of God. So yesterday I found myself asking God, "How will you make an appearance today? But then also, how will my life be the baptismal epiphany it should be in the lives of those around me?" Jesus himself was an epiphany, a new appearance of God. Our baptism is also a charge to be an epiphany. How will coming up out of those chaotic cosmic waters and into our Belovedness illuminate a new appearance of God's presence in the lives of those around us?

Blue claims, "The Spirit of God is among us, the Holy Spirit, and we often don't even notice it. Maybe we don't notice because we are looking for something pure and white, but the spirit of God is more complicated than that—fuller and richer and everywhere." The heavens tear open at the baptism of Jesus, but then that dramatic wording doesn't happen again until the tearing of the temple curtain at Jesus' crucifixion. After all the bright and fun festivities of these holy days, we're about to enter into a little stretch of Ordinary Time. Will we kick pigeons out of our way, looking to the sky and waiting for the heavens to tear open again? Or will we open our eyes to the less glamorous but relentless appearances of the Spirit of God in our lives?

There are all kinds of pigeons I shoo out of my way. Whenever I'm working on big important deadlines (you know, the ones that will make me look foolish and irresponsible if I don't complete on time with perfection), I will scoot past all kinds of holy interruptions and chances to be an epiphany presence, chances to interact with and love the living and breathing creatures

standing in front of me, rather than obsessing over the details of an event, or even a sermon. I sweep pigeons off my park bench to sit alone as I swipe past another news story, trying desperately to whisk it away before it sinks in and hurts me and moves me to act. I nearly step on pigeons as I get so self-absorbed that I breeze by those also caught up in their own minds, but perhaps eager for interaction outside of that.

Speaking again of the Holy Spirit coming to us as a stubborn pigeon, Blue remarks: “It lands, hovers, plunges, and coos; coming again and again, leaving its droppings on our sleeves. We can hit it with a stick all day long, but it keeps racing to us, desirous that we might open our hearts.” I pray that rather than falling into a lull of this cold season of ordinary time where we’d rather stay inside, we feel the briskness of the baptismal waters out of which we are called, and awaken to the Spirit stirring us—not necessarily through a thunderous proclamation from the heavens, but through many little pigeons underfoot.