

*Oh, Say, Can You See?*  
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January 13, 2008 — Baptism of the Lord  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

### **Introduction to the Morning Lesson**

When I begin planning a sermon, often several weeks before I will actually write or preach it, I read over the text I've chosen. After writing down a few quick impressions I study a bit in commentaries about the text and write down a few more notes. Then I usually go back over the notes I've made and look for an idea or theme that seems to be emerging. When I did all of that with this text, I underlined one word in my notes: "see." What did people see when Jesus was baptized?

In the Christian calendar, the Sunday after Epiphany is called Baptism of the Lord and my text today comes from Matthew's version of Jesus' baptism. As I studied this text, I think the word "see" came to the fore because of this line in the passage: "just as [Jesus] came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and *he saw* the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him." Jesus saw the heavens opened. Jesus saw the Spirit descending. Jesus saw the dove-like Spirit alighting on him. But what did others see?

Then my mind jumped to "Oh, say, can you see, by the dawn's early light," the first line of the "Star-Spangled Banner," America's national anthem. Those words come from a poem written in 1814 by Francis Scott Key. He wrote the poem after seeing the bombardment of Fort McHenry by British ships in Chesapeake Bay during the War of 1812. During the rainy night, Key witnessed the cannon barrage and in its "red glare" he saw that the fort's smaller "storm flag" continued to fly. But once the shelling stopped, he did not know until dawn how the battle fared. By then, the storm flag had been lowered, and a larger American flag flew triumphantly above the fort. "By the dawn's early light." The poem turns on what Francis Scott Key could or could not see.

It struck me then that our relationship with Jesus in a certain sense turns on what we can or cannot see in him. Let's think about that as we ponder what Jesus saw and what others saw when our Lord was baptized. My text today comes from Matthew 3.

Matthew 3.13-17 (NRSV)

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

### **ONE: What do we see in Jesus' baptism?**

I think we find it difficult to understand the Bible because we tend to read it in bits and pieces. A few verses in a devotional here, a sermon text there, a verse for the day before we go to bed. Scripture in snippets, we might call it, but we tend to miss the storyline. We don't see the big picture.

If we were reading Matthew's Gospel like a normal book, we would see something amazing

about today's text. So far in Matthew's story, an angel told Joseph in a dream that Mary would give birth to the Savior, a child who was to be named Jesus. (Matthew 1.18-25) Next comes the visit of the magi, the outsiders who followed a star to acknowledge the birth of a the King of the Jews who in fact was born for all. (2.1-12) Then Joseph and Mary escape with Jesus to Egypt, just before a jealous King Herod massacres every child in and around Bethlehem under two years of age. (2.13-18) After Herod died, Joseph brought his family back and they moved to Nazareth where Jesus grew up. (2.19-23)

Years go by and, in the verses just before today's text, John the Baptizer proclaims that one is coming who will bring judgment and baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. (3.1-12) Finally Jesus appears and is baptized. When last we saw him in Matthew's story he was a child. Now, as our text tells us, the voice of God confirms Jesus as the Beloved Son. When we see the story whole, something very dramatic is going on.

But it may not be what we think at first.

In a commentary on Matthew, Tom Wright, who is Bishop of Durham in England and also one of the best New Testament scholars writing today, says that to get the flavor of Matthew's story we should imagine ourselves entering a huge concert hall, packed to the doors with eager and excited music lovers. We know what this music will sound like. This will be music for a battle, for a victory — wonderful, glorious music.

Then the concert manager comes on stage and tells us that the famous musician we have all come to see is here. He calls us to stand in welcome of the man who will fulfill all our expectations. But when we start to applaud, a small figure comes on the stage. He doesn't look the one we thought we would see. He carries, not a conductor's baton, but a small flute. Now we are silent and just watch as he plays, gently and softly, a tune quite different from what we had imagined. And yet, as we listen, we do hear familiar themes played in a new way. The music is haunting and fragile, altering our imaginations and hopes. And, as it reaches its close, as though at a signal, the orchestra responds with a new version of the music we had been expecting all along.

Tom Wright says compare that image to John the Baptizer and Jesus. John is like the concert manager who builds up our excitement about the soloist who is going to appear. "He's coming! He's more powerful than me! He will give you God's wind and God's fire, not just water! He'll sort you out — he'll clear out the mess — he'll clean up God's farm so that only the good wheat is left!" That is John's message and we're excited because we think the living God himself is going sweep into view and make everything right all at once.

"And instead," says Tom Wright, "we get Jesus. The Jesus we have only met so far, in Matthew's gospel, as a baby with a price on his head. A Jesus who comes and stands humbly before John, asking for baptism, sharing the penitential mood of the rest of Judea, Jerusalem, and Galilee. A Jesus who seems to be identifying himself, not with a God who sweeps all before him in judgment, but with the people who are themselves facing that judgment and needing to repent."<sup>1</sup>

What do we see in Jesus' baptism? We want to see something grand. John the Baptizer leads us to expect that. But at first glance the baptism doesn't seem that grand, probably because we have a strange obsession with size. Bigger is always better, we think. Even when we try not to think that way we do think that way. Bigger always feels better.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, Part One (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) 21.

I got to thinking about this a few weeks ago when I saw a television program about Lakewood Church in Houston which is now the largest church in America. You've probably read about it or seen it on TV. Its pastor is Joel Osteen. His father founded the church and Joel became pastor when his father died in 1999. It was already large but the young Osteen led the church to begin a second, then third, and fourth worship service. Attendance doubled from 11,000 per Sunday in 1999 to 22,000 one year later. In early 2004, Lakewood was listed as both the largest and the fastest growing church in the nation when attendance reached 25,000 per week. By early 2005, the church became the first in the United States to exceed 32,000 average weekend attendance.<sup>2</sup>

Do you realize how long it would take this church to equal one Sunday's attendance at Lakewood? Five years and two months! Makes what we do here and what I do here pretty puny. Does that mean Joel Osteen is a better preacher than I am? If by some bizarre miracle the Holy Spirit plucked us each up and put us down in the other's place, would PCIS grow and Lakewood shrink? Probably. Bigger is better, right? If I were better, we would be bigger, right? You see, even when we don't want to think that way, we do think that way and it leads us into nasty places. Our fascination with size and grandeur and bigness makes us think things and see things that disappoint.

Maybe those who saw Jesus baptized were disappointed too. It didn't seem as big or as grand or as important as some thought it should be. John was certainly expecting Jesus to take charge and be in control. That's why he at first refused to baptize Jesus. But in the baptism it doesn't look like Jesus had come to take charge.

#### **TWO: What was the dove like?**

So what's going on here? What did the people actually see when Jesus was baptized? Apparently they saw a dove and let's think about that. I've always pictured this scene as rather idyllic: blue sky, warm breeze, blue water sparkling in the sunlight (although much of the Jordan River is a muddy brown). Then I picture that sweet, snow-white dove gently floating down to softly alight on Jesus' shoulder. What a beautiful, wonderful sight, don't you think — just like a nice gospel postcard.

That's how Anna Carter Florence pictured it too. She teaches preaching at Columbia Seminary and one night she was telling her family at the dinner table how she was working on this sermon about the Spirit of God descending like a dove. She made graceful wing motions with her hands to express what it would be like.

But her eleven-year-old son interrupted. "Wait a minute, Mom," he said. That's not how doves fly. Doves swoop. They're fast. When they want to catch something, they don't flutter down lightly. They zoom like a hawk: BAM!" His demonstration knocked over the milk glass. Fortunately his mother caught it before it splattered too much.

"Oh," she said. "I didn't know that, about doves. Thanks."

When we will learn, like that quiz show on TV, that middle-schoolers are, in fact, smarter

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.apologeticsindex.org/230-lakewood-church>. In 2005 the church purchased Houston's COMPAC Center and arena, former home for the Houston Rockets. It was redesigned by Morris Architects (designers of the Astrodome) as the new home for Lakewood Church. The 16,000-seat center promises to allow the church to potentially exceed 50,000 in weekend attendance.

than we are.<sup>3</sup>

But if the dove they saw looked like that, it sort of changes the image of the Holy Spirit doesn't it? That was Dr. Florence's conclusion too. It was like Jesus was the prey and the Spirit was the hunter. Nothing sweet and gentle about that. Maybe that's why Jesus overcame John's resistance. "Let it be so for now," Jesus said, because he knew there was a power coming upon him, hunting him out to claim him. Jesus knew that he was targeted. He was the Spirit's prey. He could only submit to his baptism and to the certainty that he is God's Beloved Son. Perhaps that's what baptism really is: God targeting us in order to claim us.

Maybe we don't see this as well as we should because of the way we baptize. I love our Presbyterian tradition permitting infant baptism. But this means that most baptisms take place in here the sanctuary and those being baptized are usually babies or very young children. Every once in awhile a baby will cry but that's about as anxious as it gets. Baptisms are mostly warm, sweet, gentle affairs.

But there is a raw power in baptism that may be more easily seen when baptisms are done outside. My previous church owned a lovely little camp of about 25 acres along the Spokane River. Every once in awhile, adults who had not been baptized or families with older children or youth who had not been baptized would ask if their baptisms could take place in the river. And, of course, they could. But I always wondered what passersby would think when they saw these baptisms and didn't know what was taking place.

I particularly thought that one time when I was asked to baptize two sisters who were young teenagers at the time. Immersing someone isn't as simple as you might think. People tend to float. So you actually need to sort of push them under and hold them down. So typically the baptizer has one hand in front and another behind ... and there's a going down — backwards — and a holding — and up. And I wondered what would people think if they saw this and didn't know what was happening, especially when baptizing two young, teenaged girls. It could look indecent. It could look sinister. It is anything but sweet and gentle. The water is cold, the river flowing, the footing uncertain, and everyone comes up sputtering. There is something rawly elemental about it and seeing baptism like that helps us see its theology. It is a going under, a being buried, a deathlike experience. It's no wonder that the apostle Paul wrote that in baptism we baptized into Christ's death.<sup>4</sup>

It is a dying to ourselves so we can be filled with the reality of God. This is why the Holy Spirit swooped down upon Jesus to claim him as who he is — the Beloved Son. And how different might our lives be if we see baptism not as a sweet thing we choose or choose for our children, but as a surrender to the love of God who time and time and time again swoops down upon us to gather us in. We are eternally loved by God and we are targeted by this dove of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>3</sup> Anna Carter Florence, "Preaching the Lesson," *Lectionary Homiletics* 19.1 (2007-2008): 56.

<sup>4</sup> Romans 6.3-5: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

## Conclusion

John the Baptizer expected Jesus to take charge, beat the stuffing out of the bad guys, and make everything right. We all want that. We want God — someone to solve our problems. But what we really see in Jesus' baptism is this. The Lord stood before John and stands before us to say, "I have come, not with magical solutions, but to put my very life in your hands, to plunge my very self into your hopes and fears and festivities." In his baptism, Jesus was immersed into our very lives. And we're invited to immerse our very lives in his.<sup>5</sup>

For God will not be satisfied until everywhere on earth, his life in ours and ours in his is celebrated. In the words of the sixteenth century theologian Richard Hooker, "It pleases [Christ] in mercy to account himself incomplete and maimed without us."<sup>6</sup>

What a grand thought! Oh, say, can you see, in the baptism of Jesus, God is swooping down to claim us because Jesus Christ declares himself incomplete without us. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Allen, "Theological Themes," *Lectionary Homiletics* 19.1 (2007-2008): 52.

<sup>6</sup> Quotation from Allen. "It pleaseth [Christ] in mercie to accompt him selfe incomplete and maimed without us." Also see <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9040982/Richard-Hooker>. Richard Hooker (1554-1600) was a theologian who created a distinctive Anglican theology and who was a master of English prose and legal philosophy. In his masterpiece, *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Politie*, which was incomplete at the time of his death, Hooker defended the Church of England against both Roman Catholicism and Puritanism and affirmed the Anglican tradition as that of a "threefold cord not quickly broken" — Bible, church, and reason.