

A mother was at home with her two young daughters one lazy afternoon. Everything seemed to be just fine until the mother realized something strange. The house was quiet. And as every parent knows, a quiet house in the daytime can only mean one thing: the kids are up to no good. Quietly walking into each of the girls' rooms and not finding them there, she began to get worried. Then she heard it: the sound of whispering followed by the flushing of a toilet. Following the sound, she soon realized where it was coming from. It was coming from her bathroom. Whispers, flush. Whispers, flush. Whispers, flush.

Poking her head into the room, she was able to see both of her daughters standing over the commode. Whispers, flush. One of them was holding a dripping Barbie doll by the ankles and the other one had her finger on the handle. Whispers, flush. Wanting to hear what her daughter was saying, she slipped quietly into the room. Whispers, flush. And this is what she heard: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and in the hole you go." Flush. (1) Let's talk for a few minutes this morning about baptism "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

One of the most confusing doctrines of our faith is the doctrine of the Trinity, the idea that God comes to us in three persons God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit or the Holy Spirit, if you will. To some, even within the church it sounds ridiculous that God exists as three persons but is one being.

Those little girls were right in one respect we do use this time-honored formula when we baptize people. The Trinity is an essential part of our faith. We even have a Sunday on the church calendar the Sunday after Pentecost designated as Trinity Sunday. I will say it is not a Sunday that many of us look forward to with any sense of heightened anticipation. The doctrine is a snoozer for most of us. Yes, we believe, but we can't get too excited about a doctrine that is so difficult to understand.

And yet we have this very doctrine on display in a beautiful way at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry on the day that he was baptized by John in the river Jordan.

John the Baptist, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth you will remember, was Jesus' cousin. John was in the wilderness preaching about the coming Messiah. John was an eccentric character, with his clothing made of camel's hair, a leather belt around his waist, and his diet of locusts and wild honey. Of course, maybe he was just ahead of his time. We could say he was into organic food and committed to a lifestyle of simplicity. Today he would be celebrated, not looked down upon for his unusual habits.

Actually, he was celebrated in his own time. He was a fabulously popular preacher, seemingly popular with everybody except Herod, who eventually put him to death. But that's a story for another day. John never went into the cities, the highways and byways; he stayed near the Jordan because his main purpose was to baptize persons who were repentant. In fact, that is exactly what he is doing as we open today's lesson: he was baptizing people in the river Jordan.

John's ministry and purpose, as we noted, was to prepare the way for the Messiah. His message was "Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near!"

The Jewish people were looking for a deliverer to make things right. They longed for freedom from the oppressive hand of Rome. Some of them thought that perhaps John was the person, the Messiah, God had sent to lead them to freedom.

Well, John did offer a unique kind of freedom. However, he made it clear that he was not the Messiah. "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

During one of his routine days when he was baptizing persons, John's cousin Jesus of Nazareth turned up to be baptized. This is the only time it mentions that John and Jesus met as adults, but since their mothers, Mary and Elizabeth, were close we can imagine that as cousins they saw each other quite often as they were growing up.

That is why, perhaps, that John was surprised to see his cousin among those coming to be baptized. John knew there was something special about Jesus. He admitted as much in Matthew's telling of the story. Matthew tells us John tried to deter Jesus from undergoing this sacred rite, saying in effect, "I need to be baptized by you. What are you doing coming to me?" Of course, theologians have wrestled for centuries with the same question. Why is it that the one we know as the blameless and spotless Lamb of God needed to be baptized? He didn't, of course. He was without sin. But we need to be baptized. He was setting an example for us. He also identified himself with the kingdom that John was announcing.

But, what I want you to notice today is how beautifully the doctrine of the Trinity is portrayed in these few words in Mark's Gospel: "At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'"

Let's consider for a few moments how God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are portrayed in this simple story. Let's begin with God the Father. "A voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'"

We see, first of all, the Father's love. God sounds like a proud Papa, doesn't he? "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

If I were to ask you to list the characteristics of God, you would probably give me some fifty cent words like omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. God is all powerful, God is all knowing and God is present everywhere. And, of course, you would be right. But in Jesus' mind, all of these are dwarfed by the truth that God is love.

"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

You have heard me say before that this is an affirmation that I wish every child on earth could hear without equivocation from his or her parents: "You are my son, you are my daughter, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." What a difference it would make in the world if every parent would affirm his or her child like that. I suspect we would see crime drop, delinquency drop, even terrorism disappear.

Can you imagine a world in which every child knew for certain that he or she was loved? Can you imagine a world where no young person felt the need to act out in destructive ways in order to gain parental attention or approval? At heart this is the solution to the world's deepest and most tragic problem, the emptiness and loneliness that drives people to despair: "You are my son, you are my daughter, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Baseball great Cal Ripkin, Jr. was quoted saying something about parental love sometime back. "Growing up, 'I love you' wasn't spread around too much in our household," Ripkin said. "Not that it wasn't meant. I could tell every time . . . my dad told me . . . he loved me without saying it. It's just the way things were then.

“That part is different in my family. I want my kids to hear it. I tell them, ‘I love you no matter what,’ which means, ‘Whether you’re good or bad, happy or sad. It doesn’t matter whatever you are. I love you. Unconditionally. Always.’ It all goes back to security and telling them you’ll always be there for them.”

Then Ripkin adds, “Maybe you run the risk of telling them you love them so often that it loses meaning. I’ll risk it.”

I hope we will all risk it. Tell your children often that you love them and are pleased with them.

Of course, Jesus taught us that parental love is downright puny compared to the love God has for each of us as His children. God’s love is a love that never ends. There is nothing God will not risk to win back His fallen children. In this story of Jesus’ baptism, we see the love of God the Father.

We also see the humility of God the Son. This is a recurring theme throughout the New Testament. Christ humbled himself in our behalf.

Paul says it so beautifully in Philippians 2: “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death even death on a cross!

“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (5-11).

John wondered why Jesus came to him for baptism; theologians wonder why he was baptized at all. But this was the pattern of his life. He humbled himself to be baptized by his cousin, a rough country preacher, just as later he would humble himself to go to a cross, the very emblem of suffering and shame. But it was all for us.

Humility is a misunderstood quality. Some people we characterize as humble simply because they don’t think very much of themselves. They minimize everything they do in order to curry favor with others. And we like such people. They make us feel superior. But we do not respect them. Only strong people can truly be humble.

I like something that Norman Vincent Peale once said, “Humble people don’t think less of themselves . . . they just think about themselves less.” Did you catch that? “Humble people don’t think less of themselves . . . they just think about themselves less.”

Certainly that was true of Jesus. He knew who he was, but he did not let that get in the way of his service to the least and the lowest. He was the humblest man who ever lived only because he was the mightiest man who ever lived.

The famous missionary Hudson Taylor was once scheduled to speak at a large Presbyterian church in Melbourne, Australia. The moderator of the service introduced Taylor in eloquent and glowing terms. He told the large congregation all that Taylor had accomplished in China, and then presented him as “our illustrious guest.”

Taylor stood quietly for a moment, and then opened his message with a few heart-felt words. “Dear friends,” he said, “I am only the little servant of an illustrious Master.”

That’s humility, the kind of humility that ought to characterize every follower of Christ. It’s not that we see ourselves as a doormat for everyone to walk on. We know who we are. But we humble ourselves in service to others. In this story we see the Father’s love and the Son’s humility.

Finally, we see the coming of the Holy Spirit. We read, “Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove . . .”

Notice the Spirit descends like a dove. We have two accounts of the Holy Spirit descending. One is here – like a dove and the other is Pentecost with a great wind and tongues of fire. Descending like a dove is peaceful and almost unnoticeable, like in confirmation.

The Holy Spirit is the presence of God in our lives a presence that empowers and instructs, a presence that comforts and corrects. Like baptism Christ did not need for the Holy Spirit to come upon him. He was always filled with the Spirit. But we need the Holy Spirit. It is that Spirit that helps us be what God wants us to be.

There is an old story about a pastor who was greeting folks at the door after the service. A woman said, “Pastor, that was a good sermon.”

The pastor replied, “Oh, I have to give the credit to the Holy Spirit.”

The woman said, “Pastor, it wasn’t THAT good!”

Christian comedian and singer Mark Lowry says that aspiring songwriters will often come up to him, give him a piece of music and say, “God gave me this song.”

Lowry looks at the audience and says, “What do you do? particularly if it’s not a very good song.” He says, “Sometimes I want to say to that person, ‘The reason God gave you that song is that He didn’t want it Himself.’”

“After me comes the one more powerful than I,” John said, “the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

This is to say, quite obviously, that we need to be baptized by water but we also need to be baptized by the Holy Spirit.

There was an article in the *Chicago Tribune* by a writer named Jim Yardley. It concerns a great bridge that spans the Yangtze River in China. The bridge carries thousands of pedestrians across it every day. Unfortunately, a few of these persons use the Yangtze River Bridge to end their lives. Over 1,000 people have jumped from this bridge since it opened in 1968. In 2003, a man in his mid-30s named Chen decided this had to end. Since then he has spent his weekends coming to the bridge to try to stop people from jumping. So far he has stopped 42 people from ending their lives. “It is very easy to recognize potential jumpers,” he said. “[Such a person] walks without spirit.” (2)

What does it mean, “a person walks without spirit”? I believe you know. You can often see it in a person’s eyes and in their face, in their slumped shoulders and downward gaze that they are “without spirit.”

The psalmist wrote, “Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me” (51:11). That is a profound prayer. At some time in our lives we need to pray, “Come into my life, Lord Jesus,” knowing that this is the same thing as praying that God’s Holy Spirit will come upon us. The Holy Spirit is the giver of life. The Holy Spirit is the breath of God within our lives. All of this we see played out in the story of Jesus’ baptism the love of the Father, the humility of the Son, and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

“Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’”

-

1. http://day1.org/1191-in_the_hole_he_goes. 2. Contributed. Source unknown.

Some facilitators and presenters talk about how useful “the elevator speech” can be. Imagine, they say, you are riding down an elevator and someone asks you about something. How would you come up with a short description? If they asked you what your job was? Or what your company does? Or where you live and why? What if they asked you the most important thing you’ve learned in life? Or why you believe? Or what your Catholic faith stands for?

Advertisers have this down pat. Almost all the ads we see are 90-second short pitches, like elevator speeches, to let us know about a product or how much we need their product. In fact, advertisers can sometimes get the speech down to a few words: Just do it, Be like Mike, America’s most convenient bank, or, as we endlessly heard, December to Remember.

I see something like an elevator speech in our second reading today, from the first letter of John. He is talking about what it means to know Christ; he mentions the things that help us know him, that testify to Christ. He talks about the water, the blood, and the Spirit. On this feast of the Baptism of the Lord, we can use these simple words to think about what it means to follow Jesus.

The baptism of Jesus was not an isolated event. No, when he came up from the waters, he experienced the authorization of God his Father and also the Holy Spirit who would guide him. Besides being connected to the fullness of God, his baptism was also connected to his mission—the words he used and deeds he performed—to show that a new age of mercy had begun.

His baptism was also connected to his death. Jesus would be faithful to that mission even up to the point of death. His blood means that he gave himself selflessly as a sign of reconciliation and new life. The water leads to the blood; accepting his mission led to giving himself in total love.

But John says there are water, blood, and Spirit. Jesus is baptized to accomplish his mission; he dies to bring that mission to completion; but he rises from the dead so that he could give his life to anyone who accepts him and believes in him. If only he died and rose, that would not be redemption. No, salvation is when we receive his Spirit as the pattern that directs our lives, so that we live as Jesus did.

Water represents the baptism we have all received; it’s as if the waters in which Jesus stepped have flooded onto us as well. Our baptisms mean our acceptance of mission as a disciple of Jesus. Blood represents the Eucharist in which we are made one with the body and blood of Jesus. As baptism begins our mission, so Eucharist sustains our mission and allows us to grow in it. But baptism and Eucharist are not just for themselves. They are to allow us to receive the Spirit more fully in our lives, so that the effects of Jesus’ salvation grow ever more fully within us.

John is telling us that we have been inserted into the great work of Jesus. As we finish our celebration of the Christmas season this Sunday, John reminds us what that season was all about. We plunge into the waters of Jesus in baptism to affirm God’s new life in us. We drink from the cup of Jesus’ blood at Mass so we will be permeated by his sacrificial love. We grow in the Spirit as disciples, constantly opening ourselves up to the deeper experiences in faith and service that God continues to open for us.

Water. Blood. Spirit. There, in a nutshell, is what our life of discipleship is all about.
That's our elevator speech for today!

The Christmas season ends today with the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. The beginning and end of the season have much in common. On Christmas, we celebrate God becoming one of us, taking upon himself a human nature. On the Feast of the Baptism, we celebrate the public proclamation that Jesus is more than just one of us. He has more than a human nature. He has a Divine Nature. He is the Son of God, in whom the father is well pleased.

We begin with John the Baptist. *The Gospel of Luke* tells the story of John's birth. You remember, Zachary and Elizabeth were unable to have children. Elizabeth was past childbearing age when Zachary had a vision in the Temple of the angel Gabriel telling him that he and Elizabeth would have a son that he would name John. This son would be a prophet like Elijah, one of the most powerful prophets of the Old Testament. You remember how Gabriel also told Mary about Elizabeth's pregnancy. Elizabeth was a kinswoman of Mary's; so Mary went to see Elizabeth. When she arrived, the baby inside of Elizabeth stirred. Elizabeth recognized that Mary's baby was the Lord.

Today's Gospel, from the *Gospel of Mark*, advances the story 30 years. We come upon John, teaching and baptizing at the Jordan River. He is demanding an end to evil in the world and calling the people to accept his baptism as a sign that they will join him in the fight for the Kingdom of God. He also speaks about the one to come. The last book of the Old Testament is the *Book of Malachi*. It ends with a prophecy that Elijah would come again to prepare the world for the Messiah. John is this new Elijah, as Gabriel had told Zachary.

Jesus chooses to be baptized by John to show that he is one with all those who are fighting against evil and fighting for the Kingdom of God. John says that he himself does not deserve to unfasten Jesus' sandals, but Jesus demands he be baptized.

Let me ask you something: do you consider yourself a decisive person? I'm not talking about routine decisions like what to wear in the morning or which restaurant to choose for lunch. How are your skills at making decisions that influence outcomes—decisions that can change your life? Are you a decider?

Being a decider, a decision-maker, is a learned skill. But it's not just casinos that work against us making good decisions. Our whole society is like one big casino—especially advertising. It's designed to keep us entertained and dissatisfied. It's designed to override the decision-making centers of the brain and distract us from really examining our lives. We live in a time of both information overload and option overload. When you have multiple options to choose from in every area of life, including faith and religion, how do you make the best choice?

Make no mistake. People who make the right decisions are valuable in every area of life.

On September 11, 2001, terrorists hijacked four American jets with passengers aboard and crashed them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The terrorists also intended to crash a plane into the U.S. Capitol, but passengers on board that flight defied the hijackers and the plane crashed into a field in Pennsylvania instead.

That morning, as reports of the devastating attacks came into the Federal Aviation Commission's offices, their National Operations Manager, Ben Sliney, made a critical decision. The decision was to ground all U.S. flights that day and close down American air space for all but lifesaving medical flights.

This was a once-in-a-lifetime kind of decision, and I'm sure Ben Sliney faced some questions about that decision. Every impactful decision encounters some opposition. Looking back from our vantage point, just about everyone agrees that Ben Sliney made the right decision. But it wasn't an easy call to make that morning, and Ben only had a small window of time in which to consider his options.

His decision-making skill is even more impressive considering that this was Ben's first day on the job. He had been named National Operations Manager for the FAA on September 10, 2001. (2) Ben was definitely a decider!

Each of us is a decider. We make decisions every day and some of them are live changing.. One of the decisions we made or was made for us that we had to accept was our baptism. Jesus decided to be baptized. His baptism was a theophany- epiphany where his divinity was revealed.

you've ever spent time in any large city, no doubt, you'll at some point find yourself amidst a bevy of pigeons. In our city culture, we often see pigeons as an annoyance, somewhat dirty birds that leave droppings all over our sidewalks and strut leisurely across our path. And yet, we honor the "dove" as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, a sign of peace, restoration, and love. These birds, all species of the Columbidae^[1] family, are one and the same. While we have tended to call those flocking into our cities in search for food "pigeons," we've mostly identified those wild birds that live in the crags, cliffs, and branches of forests and mountains, "doves." We love to hear their sweet, mournful coos at night, and our heart melts at their monogamous and loyal pairings. The misunderstanding, according to scientists, seems to have come from various names of the birds in different countries or from their various dwelling places. In Israel, the most common birds of the Columbidae family in Jesus' time would have been the wild dove that found its nests in the high hills, peaks, and cliffs, similar to the ones described in scripture, particularly in the Song of Songs. Unlike our usual idea of a dove, which is homogeneously white, Israel's doves were gold and silver colored, a golden body with silver tipped wings. The birds would be said to gleam in the sun.^[2] These wild, mysterious, free, mountain birds that gleamed in the light represented, in many ways, aspects of God's creative Spirit.

Not only did these doves fascinate visibly but behaved differently from other birds. They were monogamous, pairing for life, their haunting, mournful voices echoed through the

mountains, they were peaceful, gentle birds unlike many birds of prey that lived on the plains, and they never abandoned their nests.[\[3\]](#)

One of the most intriguing aspects of Jesus' baptism is the "dove" imagery that describes the Holy Spirit's descending upon Him. Here, understanding something about the Jewish people's conceptions of the "dove," can help us to understand the deep symbolism behind this description of the Holy Spirit.

First, the Holy Spirit is said according to Mark to be "like a dove descending" on Jesus. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw "the heavens torn apart," and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And then a voice "came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" Although many assume that the "he" in the paragraph is John's vision of Jesus' receiving the Holy Spirit, that may not necessarily be the case, but it could have also been Jesus, who coming out from the water, sees the Holy Spirit descending upon him and hears the voice of God." If John is viewing the phenomenon, then we can assume that this has occurred, so that John and those present can witness to Jesus' identity and mission.[\[4\]](#) Similar to the healings Jesus does, with the purpose that people can witness to who he is and to God's amazing glory, here too, the event serves to point to Jesus as God's Messiah. If the viewer is Jesus himself, then it depicts a very personal experience of God's official "ordination" of Jesus into His sacrificial ministry.[\[5\]](#) I suggest we can embrace both meanings.

As for the depiction of the Holy Spirit as a "dove," this symbolism has deep and extensive meaning in the Jewish tradition. Several scriptural references help to illuminate the Jewish symbolism of the dove: 1) Genesis 1; 2) the Song of Songs; 3) the Story of Jonah; and 3) the Story of Noah (Noah in Hebrew, which means "resting place").

From the beginning of the Creation story, God's creative Spirit is described by the Talmud as "hovering" over creation, as a dove hovers over her nest. The gleaming gold and silver bird with upraised, fluttering wings represents the creative, divine energy of God and also the nurturing, loving aspect of God, who loves creation and calls it good. God is a relational God and like a mother dove pledges in covenant to protect and be a loyal parent to Israel throughout eternity. This "feminine" aspect of God in the Holy Spirit is also typical in the Jewish faith. Ruach, the Hebrew word for Holy Spirit, is a feminine word, and many attribute the Holy Spirit with the nurturing qualities of the multi-faceted, multi-gendered God of Creation, Elohim.[\[6\]](#)

Likewise, the Song of Songs, echoes both the protective and the strikingly exquisite qualities of the Holy Spirit, which is nurturing, loving, and loyal. Whether symbolizing parent or lover, the dove is a monogamous creature symbolizing the kind of fidelity and passionate love that describes God's covenantal nature with humanity. In this sense, the symbol of the dove in Jesus' baptism, like the rainbow in Noah's story, is a covenantal marker, symbolizing new life, a new covenant, and the sign that God is "breaking through" our world in order to do something new and amazing that will change everything.[\[7\]](#)

The nurturing parent God is also sacrificial. While the dove itself is a sacrificial animal, a “clean” bird, designated for its purity, in the Jewish tradition, the dove in Jesus’ baptism also signifies the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. As Son of God and Messiah, God incarnate, the symbol of the dove also exhibits God’s grand “sacrifice of self” in order to redeem His people, His beloved Creation, for whom He would do anything and everything, being the passionate, loving, loyal, and covenantal parent He is. His declaration of love, in His beloved Son, is His ultimate blessing of Creation as “good.” Jesus is the “best” of God’s creative energy, and Jesus as God will become the atoning sacrifice for all creation. In this, we also hear the low, mournful cooing of the dove as the suffering God, the suffering servant, the long-suffering lover, the dove remaining in its nest, after its chicks have flown.^[8] The Holy Spirit will also protect Jesus in His mission, even as He serves sacrificially as “Prince of Peace.”^[9]

Even as Jesus is blessed in His baptism, he is at the same time, commissioned for a “death mission” His purity and divine nature will then be “tested by fire” and proven in his temptations in the wilderness. The “voice” of God declaring Jesus beloved is still the mournful voice of the dove, knowing what Jesus’ final mission will entail. God will sacrifice God’s self in order to redeem the beloved Creation.

Finally, while the “sign of Jonah” (Yonah means dove in Hebrew) may represent the mournful moaning of God’s voice both lamenting the sins of humanity and yet bestowing redemption upon it, this plays out most perfectly in the story of Noah (Noach). In Genesis 8:8-12, as the ark lands on the mountains of Ararat, Noah (God’s resting place) in a typical nautical practice, sends out a dove three times. The first time, the dove comes back. The second time, the dove returns with an olive branch, signifying God’s promise of new life and new covenant. The third time, the dove does not return. This “sign” for Noah is the ultimate sign of God’s redemptive, covenant promise to renew, restore, and bless creation with a brand, new start.^[10]

Jesus’ baptism is a monumental sign of God’s plan to come and a new covenant that would appear not just in a sign of a bow or a symbol of fire but in the personhood of Jesus Himself. For God created and called it good. God now redeems and calls His redemption plan “pleasing.”

Today, as you partake in your own memories of Baptism, as you renew your own baptismal vows and reaffirm in whatever ways your own covenant with God as a person and as a people, I invite you to remember the sacrificial gift of your Creator God, who in the power of the Holy Spirit has also blessed you in covenant for eternal the loving redemption.

In Jesus, God has sacrificed God’s own self, so that you can live. May your heart give thanks, and may you be ever grateful for God’s atoning and beloved Son.