

Year C, Baptism of Our Lord
January 9, 2022
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“...and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.”

Good morning! I have a lot on my mind this morning. I think we all do. Like I am so glad to with you on a Sunday morning, you all are good to pray with, but I am really not happy about being *here*, on Zoom again. I think we all thought we were past this. Thanks be to God we have this option, but I am disheartened by our return to online only worship as the pandemic surges again. And I am saddened that we had to cancel our Epiphany bonfire, again; and delay the start of our Confirmation class, another loss our young people have had to endure.

This is small potatoes; having to worship in a less edifying format, and I am sure some of our youth aren't shedding too many tears about missing Confirmation, but still... Because it hurts, surely, these losses, but not nearly as much as the hundreds of thousands of cases of COVID spreading each day, the millions across the world, the suffering, the death. There is so much loss we are feeling: loss of loved ones, loss of options, freedom, plans, opportunities, livelihoods, companionship, relationships – we have all lost normality and some the sense of smell. We all have hard decisions to make now, all the time, about things we never had to think about. Is it worth going to Tradewinds again? Is it safe to get coffee with so and so? Windy and I just canceled a February school vacation trip to St. Croix with my family because it doesn't seem safe to travel right now. Safe... It sure seems that nothing we can do can keep us completely safe from COVID, so we have to decide what is safe-*r*. What is safe *enough*. Some of that is about the risks we feel willing to take for ourselves, and also we must consider how much our risk taking increases everyone else's risk. All of that is on my mind. Yours too, I am sure.

I am also thinking about the Baptism of Our Lord, a major day in our calendar. Jesus' Baptism and the descent of the Holy Spirit is one of the three great epiphanies, the great revelations of Jesus' full and true nature to the world. (The Magi is the first epiphany, His Baptism is the second and the miracle at the wedding in Cana, water into wine, is the third – in each, Jesus of Nazareth's very special relationship to God is revealed to the world). These are deep mysteries, what happened/happens in the waters of Baptism, then and now. “The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders...” And this follows on the heels of the Epiphany, which follows the 12 days of Christmas. A lot of joyous days in our calendar all packed into a couple of weeks, that's on my mind...

...so is the fact that Epiphany, which is always on January 6th, is no longer just Epiphany, it is also January 6th, the day of a Riot? An Uprising? An unsuccessful what, Insurrection? Coup? As we pass the first anniversary of that tragedy it makes me very nervous when the trifecta of Jimmy Carter, Lawrence Tribe, and David Brooks each wrote articles about their fear that our democracy is in existential distress. It makes me nervous when retired Army generals publish columns in the Washington Post warning us that the military's loyalty might be tested if the next election is contested like the last one was. A terrible thing happened to our nation a year ago, and it has only gotten worse. That's on my mind, too.

I know some folks don't want me to speak of anything resembling politics from the pulpit. "A slippery slope, bringing politics into church" is one statement I have heard. I say it is a slippery slope avoiding talk about the moral dilemmas of the day. Have you ever heard of the Barmen Declaration? It was an ecumenical statement, largely written by the great theologian Karl Barth, and signed on to by folks like Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It was a declaration of the moral position of the church in relation to growing totalitarianism in Germany. (It was written in 1934, shortly after the Nazi's ascension to power).

The declaration was a response to the fact that many churches had been subsumed into the *Deutsche Christen* movement, Christian Nationalism, and the vast, vast majority of churches remained silent on all matters remotely political. A tiny minority of churches embraced the Barmen declaration's theses that included points like the only source of revelation is the Word of God – Jesus Christ, (as opposed to any earthly authority); the message and order of the church should not be influenced by governmental policy or rhetoric; the church should not be ruled by a "Führer" or any other earthly authority and so on. I don't know, but I am pretty sure that there are very few churches in Germany that are proud that they *did not* join in on opposing the ascent of authoritarian, fascist rulers, just as there are (hopefully) few people left who would be proud that they (or their grandfather) rooted for Bull Connor and not Dr. King.

We have to remember that in 1934 the National Socialists weren't *THE NAZIS* as we know them now. They were just a right wing party, with some abhorrent planks in their platform to be sure, but more so were just very successful in manipulating German society in general and its electoral politics in particular. Their true evil wasn't clear to most until they assumed total power and by then it was too late. Like in the year 30 CE, very few accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, or St. John as a saint or the forerunner of God's incarnation. If Pilate had the luxury of hindsight, what choice would *he* have made? If we can't talk about this stuff at church, where are we

supposed to learn how to bring our faith to bear on things that matter? Or how we relate the stories of our faith to the machinations of life right here, right now? None of this is comfortable. Some of this might make us angry, but Jesus never promised any of us a rose garden, did He?

One of my jobs as your priest is to address moral concerns in our personal lives and in our common lives together. My job is to bring up the issues, frame them in context of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (that is Karl Barth's "preaching with the gospel in one hand and the newspaper in the other"), and then suggest some spiritual tools to assist you in discerning what God is calling you to do right here, right now. Which brings us to today. And the Baptism of Our Lord, in particular in the Holy Spirit's descent upon Jesus Christ, and through that, the Spirit's continuing descent upon us and all of the wild and woolly consequences the Holy Spirit brings to the world.

We don't talk about the Holy Spirit much, do we? Why? Maybe we are afraid of violating the one sin Jesus said is unforgiveable – blaspheming the Holy Spirit. Maybe. But I think it is more probable, it certainly is in my case, that we avoid addressing the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit is so unpredictable. Is totally uncontrollable. When we start leaning in to the Spirit we have no idea where we will be led. We don't like things that are unpredictable. We fear things that are uncontrollable, things that can lead us into uncharted waters. We, generally, like to know where we are going before we set out.

The voice of the LORD is a powerful voice; *
the voice of the LORD is a voice of splendor...
The voice of the LORD splits the flames of fire;
the voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness...
The voice of the LORD makes the oak trees writhe *
and strips the forests bare...
And in the temple of the LORD *
all are crying, "Glory!"

We're talking about the Holy Spirit! It was the Holy Spirit that opened the heavens and descended like a dove, revealing God's love for Jesus Christ and His very special role in history as the Beloved, the Anointed One of God. The heavens only opened one other time in the scripture – the flood... when the windows into heaven open, watch out!

And that goes for our own lives, too. When we take our religion seriously, when we embrace God in Christ, when we relax and let the spirit take over, watch out! It gets our charismatic friends talking in tongues and being slayed left and right. (Not an Episcopal practice, largely. We

had a woman collapse at church once some years ago. A nurse ran over to help but quickly assuaged everyone's fears... "It's the Holy Spirit, not a seizure."). That is funny, but have you ever been overcome with religious fervor even remotely like that? I am not advocating an Episcopal charismatic revival, though there certainly have been those, but what I am saying is that relaxing into the Holy Spirit, surrendering to the elemental power and freedom of the *ruach Elohim* – the breath of God – to *Sophia* – Wisdom, the *Paraclete* – Advocate, the Holy Spirit – the Lord, the giver of life, can help us transcend our preconceived notions, our loyalties to things earthly, our allegiance to perishing philosophies and concepts and find God's voice for ourselves in this world.

In times of trouble, we need God. Sometimes we need God's power and might. Other times we need God's friendship and forgiveness. Sometimes we need to go to the source of light and life to tap into the better angels of our natures, especially if we find ourselves pulled by earthly anxieties and or delights. Relaxing into the Holy Spirit and following her is scary, because lifetime loyalties, generations of presuppositions might not hold up under the Spirit's scrutiny.

You have all seen the great AA bumper sticker "Let Go, Let God", right? That is what I am talking about. Letting go of what we want to be true, what some want us to believe is true, and letting the Holy Spirit lead us to what is actually true. The Holy Spirit will reassure us that the character of our leaders, matters. The Holy Spirit will show you the difference between right and wrong, justice and injustice, truth and lies, selflessness and selfishness, or to come right down to it, that which is from God and that which is not.

What Barth and the Barmen declaration people were really getting at is that we need to ensure that we are not seeking ultimate answers, not making ultimate decisions based on the interests of things earthly, things both self-interested and perishing. Right now, we too need to look beyond the principalities and powers and right to God to discern what is right and good and true.

It is a scary thing, to let go of our control and agree to follow God. The first time I did it I was sitting on the side of a hill in California's Los Padres National Forest. I was on counter-narcotics mission. Marines are used to help find and destroy pot fields on federal land. We were assisting the US Forest Service and the Ventura County Sheriffs. It was the Tijuana cartel v. US Marines. It was pretty exciting, actually. I didn't know it was God's voice, but it became very clear to me, epiphany sort of clear that that was not what I was supposed to be doing (I took that to mean being a Marine not burning down pot fields). God told me that what I was doing was not making the world a better place, was not shining the light of Christ anywhere. This made me scared because I had just submitted a package for flight school, I had no desire to reenter the civilian world,

certainly no idea what I would do out there... I liked the simplicity and security of the Marine Corps. But that voice, I know now it was the Spirit of God, grabbed me by the flak jacket and said “no more.” I am still not sure why I went along with it. It was a hard few years that followed, and I regret nothing of that decision. Nothing. (I had another moment with the Spirit that led me to ordained ministry, but that story is for another time).

Do you think Jesus knew what would come as the Spirit descended from that hole in the heavens while He prayed on the banks of the Jordan? Do you think He would have chosen the Way of the Cross of His own volition? But Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit, and He submitted and saved us all.

We’ve all got a lot on our minds right now. We can’t always tell what is right let alone what is true. Truth isn’t relative, but nearly every bit of information we get about the world beyond our direct personal experience is relative and is subject to all sorts of distortion and manipulation. “What is truth?” was Pilate’s question and he didn’t have a global 24-hour newsfeed blowing up in the pocket of his tunic. As Christians, though, with the power of the Holy Spirit descending upon us in our own baptisms, and descending upon us each time we gather at this table, be it virtually as we are right now or in all the glories of flesh and blood church, we can discern the genuine article, we can sense Truth and Goodness and Beauty, Right and Wrong, Good and Evil. And then with the Might of Creator, the Courage of the Redeemer, and the Glory of the Holy Spirit we can do God’s work in this fragile and beautiful world. Let go. Let God. The Truth will set you free.
AMEN