

## Receive the Holy Spirit

*"I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (Mark 1:8)*



What does it mean to be baptized with the Holy Spirit? I've been pondering this question lately. Not just because it's the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, but because by the grace of God and with the consent of God's people, in a few weeks I will be ordained to the Sacred Order of Priests. In the ordination rite, the bishop lays hands on the ordinand's head and prays *"Father, through Jesus Christ your Son, give your Holy Spirit..."* (BCP 533).

When I was a baby, the priest placed a hand on my head, marking me with the sign of the cross and said *"Stephen, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever"* (BCP 308). I don't remember how I felt then. However, I can tell you that today, I feel excited, frightened, overwhelmed and humbled. In short, I am in awe.

Which makes sense when pondering the awesome reality of what it means to receive the Holy Spirit. After all, the Holy Spirit existed before time and space, before light and dark, before creaturely life. The very Spirit of God hovered over the deep waters of a formless, empty and dark world. The Hebrew poetry suggests God's Spirit brooding over the good creation taking shape in the creator's imagination. The imagination of Love.

God is not a watchmaker. Genesis is not just a "once upon a time" story. God's Word is continually bringing forth new creation, loving life into being. Genesis is a story for the beginning of all things. Which means it is a story for your beginning, and mine. The Spirit hovering, brooding like a mother dove as we are conceived and brought into existence. We emerge from our mother's womb and take our first breath. *Ruach*, the breath of God, God's Holy Spirit, welcomes us into life. Though we had no words to express it, how could we not have felt excited, frightened, overwhelmed and humbled? In awe of this new thing called life.

Despite God's gift of loving creation, time and time again we failed to return God's love and to love each other. Yet God always called us back. Time after time. Age after age. Finally, in the fullness of time, God sent his only Son Jesus to restore creation to God's own image, the image of Love.

*"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan." (Mark 1:9)* As John baptized Jesus in Jordan's waters, the Father baptized his Beloved Son in the Holy Spirit. The imagination of Love coming together in a perfect Trinity of Love, the Father anointing the Son in the Holy Spirit.

The appearance of the Holy Spirit *"descending like a dove"* has a double meaning. In one sense, the dove harkens back to God's Spirit brooding over the waters of new creation. And the dove is the thrice-sent messenger telling Noah that the flood waters had receded, that life could begin anew.

But the dove is also a sacrificial animal. In rites established by Moses and practiced in Jesus' time, those not able to afford a bull or other livestock would sacrifice a dove as a burnt offering pleasing to the Lord.

The Holy Spirit “*descending like a dove*” is God’s anointing of his Son as a sacrificial offering. The Messiah saves by the cross. By the cross, Jesus takes our own brokenness upon himself. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, “*by his wounds we are healed.*” (Isaiah 53:5) By the cross, Jesus leads us into the new creation of his resurrection.

The bittersweet sign of the dove would not have been lost on those standing on Jordan’s banks. As the heavens were torn apart, how could anyone not have felt excited, frightened, overwhelmed and humbled? In awe of the Spirit hovering over a carpenter’s son. Anointed by God, yet not a king in any earthly sense. But rather, a poor person’s sacrifice.

This was the good news Paul shared with the disciples in Ephesus. The Ephesians were followers of John the Baptist, but did not yet know Christ. As Paul tells the story of the crucified messiah whose sandals John was not fit to untie, these seekers come to understand the full import of God’s plan to reconcile all things in Christ. “*Baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus,*” (Acts 19:5) they are overcome by the power of the Holy Spirit. Like the apostles on Pentecost, these twelve speak in tongues and prophesy, perhaps the only voice they can give to being excited, frightened, overwhelmed and humbled all at once. In awe as they awaken to the new creation of the resurrected Jesus Christ.

Today, my friends, we will join those Ephesians in our own Pentecost moment. We will renew our baptismal vows, inviting the awesome power of the Holy Spirit to work through us to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ, to love our neighbor, to strive for justice and peace and the dignity of all.

And today, I am in awe at the prospect of being remade into a new creation as a priest in Christ’s Church.

I’m excited because it is a call I have felt for many years.

I am frightened and overwhelmed because I am not sure how I will be of service. My imagination pales before the imagination of Love. I was the sponsor for a young confirmand once. As a thank you gift, she gave me this cross. It says “*Imagine the Possibilities.*” Frankly, I sometimes can’t. But God can, and that is enough.

Finally I am humbled. I look at the ways you live the life of the Spirit. Faithfully serving as a parish community through pandemics, economic insecurity and even civil unrest. Loving your neighbors. Welcoming me and other newcomers in your midst. Reflecting the depth and richness of the entire Church. I say to myself, what did I do to deserve being ordained a priest in this Church? Of course the answer is, nothing. But by the grace of God, I have been brought home.

So it is for us all. Brooded over by the same holy dove that descended on a poor Nazorean, we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit. Marked as Christ’s own forever. Made beloved children of a new creation. By the awesome power of the Holy Spirit, may we go forth and invite others into the same grace we have been given, “*baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*” (Matthew 28:19)