

SERMON: BAPTISM OF JESUS THE SPIRIT OF THE TIMES...AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

January 14, 2024

Our Bible lesson today paints this picture: As Jesus was coming up out of the water from His baptism, He saw heaven torn open and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove. The Spirit descending. The Holy Spirit.

There are all sorts of spirits. Allow me to list a few spirits. There is the spirit of the times which is examined by sociologists, journalists, talk show hosts and politicians. This spirit of the times is invoked by financial planners, historians and market researchers, the spirit of the times.

And there's more spirit. If you live in Knoxville, you know about big orange spirit, school spirit, team spirit. We got spirit, yes we do. Team spirit.

And there is the great spirit, the spirit worship of the native Americans. We respectfully acknowledge the great spirit.

And Eastern religion directs attention toward the goal of absorption into the Atman, the great sea of being in which all individuality is lost, a dissolution of the spirit.

And from the classic Greek philosophers, we think of each person's soul as the spirit within, the immortal self temporarily housed in a mortal body. The eternal human spirit.

I intend no evaluation of these ideas of spirit, except to declare that they are not to be confused with the Holy Spirit of our Christian faith, the same Spirit that descended upon Jesus at His baptism.

Sometimes when folks talk about spirit or spirituality, they speak very generally about the spirit, such as a quest for some generic spirit they can access through meditation or physical discipline or immersion in nature or even through a worship experience. Again, no evaluation of such spirituality, except to state that the Holy Spirit is distinct from any such generic spirit.

The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Christian faith, is a particular, unique and lively being, who is completely self-determining. That is to say that the Holy Spirit is not subject to any human control or summoning at all. It is not contained or limited because it is Spirit is God.

We understand, therefore, how stupendous was the event described by our Gospel lesson this morning, the baptism of Jesus. As Jesus was coming out of the water, He saw heaven torn open and the Spirit descending on Him on the wings of a snow white dove.

I remember the last time we discussed the baptism of Jesus in our confirmation class, I asked, "What do you think happened at that moment?" One of our students said, "God got out...and went into Jesus. And now God's really out."

I love that description, so true.

Mark, the author of today's Gospel, proclaims Jesus as the One through whom the whole power and glory of God breaks into the world. In other words, God's really out.

Now, just in case there be uncertainty about exactly what this means, Mark tells us there was a voice from heaven speaking to Jesus, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

So, this is not one of those Scooby Doo mysteries where you do not know who the good guy is until the end. If we want to know what God is about, what God's will and judgment are, we must keep our eyes on Jesus. All those other spirits of our times may fascinate us, but Christians follow no spirit that contradicts Jesus or pulls us away from Him.

We like to believe that our lives are directed by our conscious and deliberate thoughts, reasoning carefully and wisely, balancing value to make precise judgments. How well we know the spirits that move us.

Habits, compulsions, passions, patriotism, even mob mentality. Sometimes it may be noble and romantic, but others it more like despair. We may say we were overcome, out of our heads.

What spirit holds your life? Do you know? What spirit controls you?

We proclaim Jesus as the One who ushers the Holy Spirit into the world to banish all those lesser spirits holding us captive. Jesus came that we might be set free. For us and for our salvation. The Holy Spirit is our liberator.

In this world we are baptized every day into the waters of regret and failure. In Christ, we are baptized into the Holy Spirit who breaks in for our deliverance, who makes us holy.

When you are caught in this Holy Spirit, nothing that happens will work for your destruction, for this Spirit is life. When you trust this Spirit, your own life will be good for others. God will touch you with God's holiness and you will live.

There are all sorts of spirits in our lives. But only one Spirit, one Holy Spirit. Remember your baptism.

Remember your baptism daily and accept God's gift. Say yes to God's Spirit that you may be free of the world's spirits which use and abuse us all. Let the Father, Son and especially the Holy Spirit, be your God. Amen.