

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens 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."

This is what is known in the movies as a "jump-cut," moving from one time to another in a heartbeat. It seems that

we were just celebrating Christmas. On January 6th we celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany. Jesus was still the little baby, lying in the manger, being visited by tall and imposing strangers from the East. And then, all of a sudden, in the reading today he is a grown man, coming to the river to be baptized by his cousin John.

Of course things happened in the meantime. Joseph was warned in a dream to take the baby to Egypt to escape the murderous insanity of Herod's rage, and so they went, and then returned sometime later, settling in Nazareth, in the Galilee. Jesus grew through childhood, hanging out in the carpenter's shop with his dad and learning the Torah, like any good Jewish boy. There is a snapshot in Luke of Jesus at twelve, staying behind to debate the scholars in the Temple, while his family searched high and low and probably tore their hair out about where this most precious boy might be. But the most important part of the story begins here, begins now, with Jesus coming to be baptized.

He had surely thought about it for awhile — months, at least, maybe years. John had been out there in the hot, desolate wilderness of Judea, preaching by the thin trickle which is the River Jordan, preaching sin and repentance and renewal and change. Things were really rotten in Israel — poverty, unemployment, fear, despair. The golden vision of the Kingdom of David, their heritage from the past, seemed like just so much fantasy — a fairy tale. Their past seemed a dream, and their present a nightmare.

John, like one of the Old Testament prophets, had a vision of the need for all Israel to repent and start over again. He had begun to preach this stern, tough-love message for months, even years before Jesus showed up. People had begun coming out to hear him, to think about their own lives, to repent, to be baptized, to try to change things. By the time Jesus got there, John had gathered a following. Jesus must have thought about it, considered joining him, weighed its possible meaning for his life. And finally, he made his way out to hear this distant cousin of his, out in the wilderness.

John was proclaiming the need for repentance so that the Messiah would come — the Messiah, whom God would send to fix the mess of people's lives, of the life of Israel. John seems to have been convinced that God would only send this long-awaited Messiah when enough people behaved themselves well enough to make a place for him.

Did Jesus have any idea, before he went, what would happen to him there? Perhaps he did, perhaps not. Perhaps he went not really expecting anything, but unable to stay away any longer. When he got there he surely stood around and listened for awhile — maybe even for days. Finally, it seemed time, and so he waded into the water, standing in line with the others to repent and be reconciled. But when he got up to John, something strange

happened. John looked at him, startled, shocked, and refused at first to baptize him. John said, “You’re the one who ought to be baptizing me! I can’t baptize you!”

Did Jesus know in that moment that something powerful was happening? Maybe, maybe not. Clearly this wasn’t the way it usually happened. And somehow Jesus was sure that it had to happen the way it usually did: “Let it be so now,” he said, “for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” To “fulfill all righteousness,” to do it by the book, by the tradition. To dot the i’s and cross the t’s. To live it out, just like everybody else. And so, John consented.

He put his arms around Jesus, lowering him into the murky water of the River Jordan, holding him there for a moment, then lifting him up, transformed, renewed.

And as Jesus was being lifted up from the water, something mysterious, something otherworldly, happened — what we have come to call a “mystical experience” when it happens to us or people we know. Just as his head and shoulders came up out of the water, Jesus saw the heavens open and a dove float gently down and alight on him. And he heard a voice, coming from that opening in heaven, say, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Did John hear it too? Or the people around him? Matthew doesn’t say so. Matthew seems to think that the experience was a private, intimate moment between God and Jesus alone. One thing is certain, though. In that moment, Jesus’ whole understanding of his life was affected, maybe even changed completely. He suddenly knew clearly that he had to go off alone to pray and contemplate the message given him that day in baptism, just as he came up out of the water.

Immediately afterward, says Matthew, Jesus “was led by the Spirit into the wilderness.” We remember this time as the 40 days in the desert, which we commemorate in Lent. Just for the moment, though, let’s stay with Jesus and that experience in baptism.

Could he have expected it? Well, he surely expected something to happen or he wouldn’t have thought about it so long, and would have been more surprised by John’s resistance to baptizing him. Did he understand it all beforehand? Surely not, or he would not have needed to spend those forty days in the wilderness, “unpacking the experience,” as we’d say today; struggling with the meaning of it for his life.

But what, finally, does all this mean to us? Surely our own baptisms don’t compare with our Lord’s experience, do they? Clearly, none of us is called to be the Lord, the Messiah, the Christ who reigns in glory. But, conversely, through our baptism, all of us become one with the Christ. As we pray in the baptismal service: “We thank you, Almighty God, for the water of baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.” As Jesus was baptized, so are we baptized — to become who we are called to be, to begin a ministry.

What, you’re saying that no dove appeared over you, nor a voice issued forth from heaven (in tones that sounded like James Earl Jones)? Perhaps not. But perhaps we’re just not listening clearly. Perhaps we expect it to look like a dove and sound like James Earl Jones, but it looks and sounds quite different — so that we don’t recognize it as a sign and a voice

from God. And perhaps we think that because it happened to Jesus, the Lord and Christ, it couldn't possibly happen to us, lowly followers that we are.

Some of our call we share with every one of our brothers and sisters in Christ. As we are united in baptism with the Body of Christ, we all share in some of the ministry to which he was called. One place our call to that ministry is spelled out in the baptismal promises in our prayer book. Shortly, as we renew our baptismal covenant, each of us will be asked to affirm that we will — with God's help — undertake a series of responsibilities: to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to strive for justice and peace among all people. These are the ministries shown on earth by Christ, taught by the apostles, required of us in our baptism.

But just as Jesus' ministry was unique to him, each of us is called to our own unique ministry. We are called, in fact, to grow into the fullness of ourselves as we were created by God to be. Part of our life after baptism is to discern just who we are called to be, and then to live it out as fully as we can — with God's help.

This brand new year and the season of Epiphany is a good time for us to renew the work of discerning who God has called us, individually, as a parish, and as a whole church, to be. Because whether or not you saw the Dove alight on you, whether or not you heard the voice say it, you — your very self — are a Child of God, a beloved one, and with you God will be well pleased.

One final thought. As a new year begins and Lent approaches once again, I encourage all of us to use the Baptismal Covenant as a first step in growing our faith and deepening our spiritual lives. While it is vital for us to participate in corporate worship, it is my belief and experience that in order to truly grow spiritually, we need one another. Over my years as a priest and bishop I have become absolutely convinced that small groups of Christians gathered together to grow in their spiritual lives is the only means to that end. Unless we are sharing our lives with one another, our beliefs, questions, and life experiences, our spiritual lives simply remain the same, year after year. It is also my experience that churches that are healthy and growing, mainline and non-denominational, have a strong commitment to small groups. That is simply a fact. Small congregations such as ours can do the same, just on a smaller scale. I can absolutely guarantee that you will never regret it. Think about it. Talk about it. Pray about it. Amen