

January 14, 2018 Baptism of Jesus
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Genesis 1:1-5, Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7, Mark 1:4-11

(Story about the dove from Nadia Bolz-Weber's sermon from 5/25/12. Quote from Michael Rogness from Living by the Word in the 12/20/17 Christian Century, page 20. Beloved Community from <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy>. Alondra Gomez testimony at the ISIAAH Seeing AI as God's Children event on 1/7/18, Basilica, Minneapolis.)

Grace to you, beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen.

Pastor Nadia Bolz Weber tells the story of the (now sort of famous) Lutheran church in Denver, called House for All Sinners and Saints.

It's a church that seems to be every other church's little sister, so they get a lot of hand me downs.

One day they received a full set of paraments, altar coverings, in different colors, for different church seasons, sometimes with coordinated symbols for the season.

A group went through the boxes, pulling out the Lenten purples, the Advent blues, the simple greens.

Finally they came to a red set which Nadia describes as having an "image of a descending dove with completely crazy eyes and claws that looked like talons."

Surely this was created for Pentecost, but instead of the gentle, peaceful doves we so often picture, this Holy Spirit looked quite a lot like a raptor.

"Man,' someone said. 'We can't use this one, it makes the Holy Spirit look dangerous.'"

It's not Pentecost today, that'll come at the end of May, but the Holy Spirit is still at center stage this Baptism of Jesus Sunday...And that Holy Spirit, truth be told, looks—well, precisely: a little dangerous. The way Matthew and Luke tell the baptism story, the heavens open neatly and a dove drops down to alight sweetly on Jesus.

Mark, though, tells it like this: when Jesus is coming up out of the water, the "heavens were torn apart."

To tear, to rend. In Greek that word is *schizo*, to split apart or to rip open.

The same word is used at the end of the gospel at the crucifixion when the temple curtain is torn in two.

The same *idea* is in the very beginning, in Genesis, when night is torn from day, and form from the void.

The heavens are torn apart and the Spirit descends like a dove on Jesus.

Or maybe more truly, descends... like a raptor, intense, talons out, ready.

So often we imagine baptisms with sweet babies, and that's all good.

But here heavens are torn open, never to be stitched back together quite the same.

Here lives are laid bare and the Holy Spirit is at work in some dangerously, life-altering, hope-revealing ways.

Michael Rogness writes, “In baptism we become part of a people.”

A community, God’s people, the Beloved Community that Dr. King envisioned.

A beloved people claimed by the Holy Spirit with a fiercely loving grip.

Oh, I know, there are times when I, when we, seek that sweet, soft Jesus. He’s got us, he does.

And then there are weeks when the rhetoric in which we swim and the actions of our world are so harsh,
so genocidal, so antithetical to what we as the baptized people of God must be,
that this fiercely loving Holy Spirit is our best salvation, our strongest call.

That’s what I invite us into today: this beloved community created by a fiercely loving Holy Spirit.

Today, I simply offer four stories about this life of baptism.

The first one is beautifully mundane, holy, and dangerous in its daily-ness.

Ann Rolle Kreider popped by my office this week and read me a snippet from her journal penned that very morning, a paragraph about her daily lap swimming. I share this with her permission:

She describes taking hold of the railing, easing herself step by step into the deep end of the pool.

Finally at the last step she says to herself each morning “remember your baptism” or simply “baptism”.

Ann writes, “This is the YWCA pool. Perhaps no one but me practices this ritual.”

She goes on, “This is not holy water. Says who?”

For me it is all holy water. A dip in the holy. Start my day holy. Cleanse my soul holy.”

Not a baptism goes by that I don’t coach parents of little ones to talk about baptism and God’s never ending love as they bathe their infants, or as toddlers splash about in the wading pool on a lazy summer day.

But really, how vital for the rest of us to remember daily our baptisms in the pool or the shower, or at the kitchen sink.

In the midst of hectic times, this Holy Spirit has a grip and will not let us go: Remember your baptism.

This week I called long time Hope member Wayne Lee to get the scoop on our baptismal font.

He told me about how you all worked so hard to renovate our sanctuary in the 1990s.

The architect designed an 8-sided granite baptismal font that involved a pump and a toilet valve and a lot of silicon, but the pressure broke down that silicon and it leaked (a lot) through to the ceiling tiles below.

So then it stood there, unused as designed, with a simple bowl set inside to baptize and remind.

And that was enough, baptisms happened, right?!

But in 2009 Wayne, a creative spirit, a feisty artist, with his mechanical mind had spent enough Sundays in the front row looking across at the under-used font: “I’m tired of this,” he said.

“I’ve got some inheritance money from my parents. Something needs to be done, so I’ll do it.”

And so Wayne dreamed up a big copper bowl and spent part of the summer with it resting on saw horses in the backyard, tinkering with the pump, the timer, the controls, a heater, aiming to make it easy enough for us to switch on and off each Sunday morning.

Then he enlisted Tim Abrahamson's woodworking mind to help design the beautiful wooden base, and a granite cutter to craft the top.

And finally, now days, it welcomes and washes, inspires and centers and roots, and sends us flowing with these powerful baptismal waters of promise: You are a beloved child of God, you are enough.

I'm taken by Wayne's story for I see in it how Wayne's parents, now saints at rest, passed down their values, their beliefs, their work ethic, their resources.

And I see Wayne and Tim and our facilities team creatively, tenaciously tapping their God-given wisdom to fashion something usable and beautiful and holy.

I can't help but think of that dangerous looking Holy Spirit,

for at times like this we must use our gifts to creatively, daringly solve problems.

I've also been recalling a story I first heard from our synod's Racial Justice Organizer, Jaddie Edwards.

MLK's father was Martin King, Sr. and he and his wife named their second child Martin King, Jr.

Martin King, Sr. was himself a Baptist preacher, deeply involved in the civil rights movement, head of the Atlanta NAACP.

As Jaddie explained it, Rev. King, Sr. traveled to Germany in the mid 1930s and was so moved by what reformer Martin Luther had done in dismantling systems as usual, that he returned home and changed young Martin's name and his own name, adding Luther in the middle.

Our baptismal call bids us to work for justice, for dignity, indeed when needed, to dismantle systems as usual.

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," Martin Luther King, Jr. would say,

For justice is a birthright of every human being in the Beloved Community.

And isn't that the community to which God calls us in baptism?

[Added Note: After worship I learned that MLK and his father were actually named Michael King, Sr. and Michael King, Jr..]

Last Sunday I joined others at an interfaith service at the Basilica embracing immigrants and refugees.

Over and over powerful testimonies were shared.

One was from a Latina woman, Alondra Gomez, from the Church of the Ascension in north Minneapolis.

She's a younger woman, a DACA recipient, college age, and she came to this country when she was 1½ years old, with her mom.

Her younger siblings have all been born here and so Alondra is distinctly aware of their different experience, and her own precarious, vulnerable status.

She asked the crowd of a thousand or so gathered in the Basilica,

“Do you see me? Do you see that I am a beloved child of God?

I am counting on you to get involved and act like my life depends on it—because it does.”

I'm counting on you, she said.

Isn't that what we're really doing for one another, counting on each other to see, to name, to hold?

Counting on each other daily to remember the grace, dignity, of baptism, so others can remember theirs.

Counting on each other to use our faith and wisdom and creativity and skill to shape the common good and make everything work better: from our baptismal font to the immigration process.

Counting on each other to be about dismantling systems as usual and truly being the Beloved Community.

I'm counting on you, Alondra said, I'm counting on you.

Remember that red parament I mentioned in the beginning, the one where someone held it up and said,

“Man, we can't use this one, it makes the Holy Spirit look dangerous”?

The church has tried forever to domesticate the Holy Spirit.

It turns out that the very same Spirit that tore through the heavens at Jesus' baptism,

nabs a hold of us and our beloved world with an unshakeable grip, and will never, ever let us go.

Thanks be to God for that fiercely loving Spirit.

Remember, dear ones, that you are God's beloved forever. Amen.