



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

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Baptism of Our Lord, January 12, 2020

Sermon Title: "Spirit Goose"

Sermon Texts: Matthew 3:13-17, Isaiah 42:1-9

As we enter time after Epiphany, it's good to start keeping in mind that this time reveals more of the truth of Christmas. Of God with us. Those stories of angels telling shepherds and dreams leading Magi to follow a star. Where they have encounters with God, participate in God's divine action and will leave unable to go back to a "business as usual" way of life. This continues as Jesus comes to be baptized in the river Jordan by John, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy:

"Here is my servant whom I uphold
My chosen in whom I take delight
I have put my Spirit upon him."

And yet, we would do well to remember the prophet also said:
"The former things are passing away and new things I declare."

And so it is. As Jesus now comes to be baptized, John's initial reaction is to reject this- "this is not how it should be done." He recognizes Jesus as the Messiah and cannot even remotely envision Jesus essentially stooping to John's level. But Jesus' response is to declare a new thing and change John's vision, saying, "John this IS right. Let it happen." John yields, the sky opens, God speaks and the Spirit descends.

Though we can romanticize this event, as a ray of sunlight, a stylized Jesus, and a sweet fluttering Spirit dove in Celtic Christianity, the bird that depicts the Holy Spirit is not a dove. It is instead one seen in the Celtic world-the wild goose. And I know you might be thinking- "that's not how it should be done." This story is about Jesus, but it is also about the Spirit. So let's let it happen and consider- what about a Spirit goose?

Celtic Christians saw how the Holy Spirit has a tendency to disrupt and surprise in ways that look like a wild goose. Geese make lots of disruptive noise. And sometimes this is exactly what is needed. One legend tells of loud cackling geese alerting sentries to an invading army attempting to creep up to the walls of a castle. Initially jarring, but ultimately exactly what is needed. I can imagine John the Baptist as a loud honking goose- disrupting those around him with his warning of repentance, calling out threats. David Clark writes, "The song of the Spirit goose is not sweet in its insistence upon renewal and change, justice and truth. It is sometimes even harsh and threatens the "peace and unity" we claim exists.

But then, as the Spirit goes where the Spirit will, John too is disrupted and surprised in turn, as Jesus tell him, "you should baptize me."

Then Jesus goes on to say where the Spirit may want us to be today. Because Jesus not only tell John what to do, he says that this "is right for 'us.'"

That little word "US" is one we might move right past in this dialogue, but listen...

Jesus doesn't tell John that this is right for Jesus. He says this is right for US.

It is right for US to fulfill God's purpose of righteousness. Let it happen now.

That Spirit will descend and will drive Jesus forward without a break, like being chased by a stirred up goose.

At the same time, this wild goose Spirit is creating God with US, unleashing a restoration of community that will upend all understandings about God's vision and our world. And this is the other part of the Spirit goose that is worth considering today.

You see, the wild goose is one of the most communal of God's creatures, drawing its life from the flock. This Spirit brings us together to support one another and travel life's journey together. This may disrupt our patterns too, but we can learn a lot from this Spirit goose as well.

Geese fly in formation together because it increases how far you can fly. Flying is a cooperative business. When a goose falls out of formation, it feels the drag and resistance of flying alone, and quickly longs to get back into formation. When a goose is sick or wounded, two others follow it to help and protect it until it either recovers or dies, while the others continue to fly on. Those separated (remember it is not one alone), rejoin the formation when they can. When flying in formation, those flying behind honk to encourage those in the front to keep the speed.

Can we hear that Spirit? A Spirit now placed upon not only upon Jesus but upon us in our baptism? Perhaps the epiphany is that "Emmanuel 'God with us'" is not simply an identity marker for Jesus as God, and what Jesus will do, but a vision for community moving forward where God is with US and we are with one another.

In this country we have long cultivated notions of rugged individualism, pulling one's self up by your own boot straps, that idea from Horatio Alger, whose "rags to riches" stories always followed the same pattern- some impoverished boy rises due to his individual effort, determination, and courage. This would catch the eye of some wealthy person who condescends from on high to then change one boy's story for good, allowing him individually to rise up to the middle class and become "respectable."

In the gospel, God's Spirit, is not a spirit of individualism but of community, wholeness and restoration. Jesus showing up among us shows that just as God takes delight in God's beloved Son, Jesus manifests God's will and delight in us. Instead of singling some of us out, Jesus surprises us by coming to draw all of us into participating in righteousness. Where Jesus sees "US."

When we meet this Christ and see who he really is, we will never be the same, as we begin to share in his mission. Two other times in Matthew we will see this more fully. Later in Matthew 12:15-21 Jesus and his disciples will be followed and surrounded by the crowds pressing in from everywhere. Quoting part of this same Isaiah passage, Jesus will reveal God's will by curing all of them and calling his disciples into holy work.

At the end, the risen Christ will tell His disciples- "Now, YOU go therefore-make (more) disciples of all nations, baptizing them, and teaching them what I have revealed."

May we see anew that Spirit not only entering Jesus in identity and empowerment, but also entering US and creating unity for serving.

And may we ever ponder:

How the Spirit might be encouraging us to kindle and rekindle such a vision of God's community

How we might renew community where it is out of sync with God's purposes and vision.

Such visions may ask much, but our Lord also gives much. Like the goose, we never fly alone. And though encountering Jesus may sometimes leave us with more questions, God promises we will always see God with US revealed along the way.

Amen.