

We might think that if only God would speak from heaven, more people would believe in Him and this world would be a better place. Such thinking is accompanied by butterflies, rainbows, bunny rabbits and sunshine as being wishful thinking. Even after hearing the voice of God Himself, many of His creatures still would not believe in Him.

In our sinful nature we are like children who throw tantrums, sticking their fingers in their ears so they can't hear what their parents are saying. We like to talk to and about ourselves rather than listen to the voice of God. We look at the beauty of the world around us and say, “Mother Nature” rather than attributing this creation to the handiwork of God. We count our possessions and pat ourselves on the back, claiming such things as ours rather than seeing them as the blessings of God. Whatever good happens to us in life does so by “luck,” so we think, rather than being the grace of God. Only when our fingers are out of our spiritual ears can we hear the voice of God speaking to us. He does so through His Son living in our human flesh, Jesus the Christ baptized for us and anointed by the Holy Spirit for our salvation.

We like to conform. We want to be like others. We don't like to stick out. We want to blend in with the crowd. We like to do what everybody else is doing. We go along in order to get along. So to us John appears strange. His food and clothing make him seem weird. Would we want to hang around with such an odd person? But the physical appearance of John is a reminder for us that as Christians we should stick out in this sinful world. We should live differently, set apart from others. They should not be surprised to find out that we are baptized believers in Jesus. We should show that to them by the special way in which we live.

This is more important in our world now than ever before. The culture around us increasingly is rejecting the Christian message and turning away from the one true God. That makes us the radicals. We reject the sinful selfishness that others accept and even celebrate as normal. We cherish the god-pleasing values that others see as strange. Our love for others, our sacrificial giving, our regular worship, and our commitment to moral standards make us appear different to the world. So also with John. He pointed people to Jesus then. Our lives should do the same for others now.

John has a mission to fulfill. He is preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. His message is meant to turn people away from their past sins to a new life of godly obedience. At the time of this text, baptism is not

a new thing. For years it has been performed on Gentiles who were accepting the Jewish faith and its customs as their new life. But what is shocking in John's teaching is that even good Jews, children of their father Abraham, also are sinners needing this repentance.

Then along comes Jesus. He has no need for this baptism. He has no reason for this repentance. He has no sin. Matthew's gospel records John initially refusing to baptize Jesus because of this. But the One who has no sin comes to be sin for us. Jesus is here to take the place of sinners. On the cross Jesus will suffer the eternal punishment that our sins deserve. Jesus will die because of our sins. Even now, three years before Good Friday, Jesus steps into our place. As one of us Jesus receives this baptism, a sign of repentance and forgiveness, not for any sins He committed, but for our sins that He has taken from us.

It is quite a responsibility that the man Jesus has. With this baptism Jesus begins His public ministry of teaching, healing and suffering. But Jesus is not alone. He receives the assurance of His special mission from a unique source. The Son of God living in our human flesh needs strength. The skies open. A dove appears. This bird of purity, peace and gentleness descends upon Jesus. This is the physical form of the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

But it is not the first appearance of the Spirit in flight. In our Old Testament reading from Genesis 1 we hear that the Spirit of God was "hovering over the face of the waters." When God cleansed His creation by means of a Great Flood, it was a dove that Noah sent out from the ark to find dry ground so that his family could begin God's re-creation. Now the Holy Spirit appears as a dove to signal a new creation, the re-creation of people in the image of God. This happens by the life, death and resurrection of God's Son, Jesus Christ. The perfect and sinless Jesus restores us in His heavenly Father's sight as being perfect and sinless also. Jesus is the agent of God's creative and saving act. The Holy Spirit is present to announce to Jesus and to us that God's new creation has begun.

The Holy Spirit is not the only witness of Jesus' person and work in our text. In the Genesis reading God creates by the power of His word, "let there be," and there was. Now to begin His new creation the Father speaks up again. He lets Jesus and us know His credentials to be our Savior. Jesus truly is the Son of God. Born on earth, He lived our

human life to carry out the Triune God's work of saving us from the damning effects of our rebellion against God. Jesus comes to make us the chosen people of God once again with God's gracious gift of life.

Wouldn't it be nice if our heavenly Father would speak so clearly to our lives and help us make our big decisions? "Marry this person. Buy that house. Take this job. Have that operation." Our lives would be so much easier if God would only speak to us in this way! But it just does not happen like that, does it? Even Jesus heard His Father's heavenly voice only three times during His ministry. We begin this season of Epiphany hearing God's voice. We will end Epiphany at the Transfiguration with Jesus hearing that voice again as He begins His way to the cross.

But our God does speak to us. We hear His inspired words recorded for us in the pages of the Holy Bible. His voice also speaks in the baptism that Jesus has given to us, the sacrament that gives us the Holy Spirit, faith, forgiveness, new life and eternal salvation. Do you remember the last time you witnessed a baptism? Did you see a dove flying around the sanctuary or hear a voice booming from the ceiling? Not with these eyes and ears of flesh. But the ears of faith hear the heavenly Father's voice saying, "You are My child, whom I love; with you I am well-pleased." The eyes of faith see the Spirit descend into the soul of the one being baptized.

Sad to say, it can and it does happen that many so blessed by baptism turn away from that faith. We can close our eyes and shut our ears to God's work in our lives. There are times that we do not act like the children of our heavenly Father. We doubt that God loves us. We lose our hope in the life that God promises us. We fear that God cannot take care of us, protect us or provide for us.

Yet God's promise of salvation given to us in our baptism always remains valid. That new birth as a child of God continues to be His gift to us. Baptism is always there for us to cling to this means of our repentance and forgiveness. God is always true to His word at our baptism. We are His chosen and forgiven children with His life and salvation.

Some water, the presence of the Holy Spirit and the voice of the heavenly Father at His baptism started Jesus Christ, the Son of God, on His way to the cross, His death and resurrection for us. Some water, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the word of the heavenly Father in our baptism sets us apart as the children of God in Jesus and puts us on the path of life eternal. AMEN