

Held by the Spirit

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Acts 8:14-17

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I stand before you filled with expectation. But you, I suspect, also filled with expectation. In fact, there might not be a moment of greater expectation in the known world than when a new preacher walks up into the pulpit for the first time in a new church. Some of you are probably sitting there thinking, "I hope that search committee knew what they were doing."

In today's Gospel text, Luke tells us that "the people were filled with expectation." Oh please, they were saying, don't let us be disappointed. Their lives were lives of disappointment already. Poverty, hunger, brutal occupation by the Romans. They wanted a Messiah. They needed a messiah. They hoped that John would be their messiah.

John. We always think of John the Baptist as an eccentric wild man, don't we? Perhaps we present him as so other worldly because we know only a few things about him, and one thing is that he ate locusts and wild honey. But such a characteristic might not have been so unorthodox in the first century. It might be as if a future historian looks back at us and says, "well, they ate tofu and avocado toast."

So, when he says "I am not even worthy to untie his sandals" we assume he is being abrupt, annoyed, angry even. Kind of like: if I am unworthy, imagine how unworthy you are. But imagine with me something different. But maybe John isn't angry and wild, maybe he says it more like:

"The one who is coming is so awesome and amazing, so incredible that I don't even qualify to be his servant. I baptized you with water, but he will baptize with the spirit. With fire. Hang on to your hats--he's the real deal."

Jesus is baptized. Luke doesn't say that John baptizes him. And he is just baptized with the rest of the crowd. He has to stand in line like everyone else. He waits his turn, and then when it's all over, he goes off, away from the crowd to a quiet place and he prays.

In the congregational church after a baptism, we don't go off to pray--we go off to lunch. If you live in Wooster, you go to O'Connors. Actually, first we have an extended photo shoot at the front of the church. With the pastor. Unless you don't like the pastor, then you do it quick before she's done shaking hands at the door. Then we go to lunch.

Jesus is baptized.

A little boy came to me one day after the service and he said, "I want to get baptized." He was about seven years old. I said, "Why do you want to be baptized?"

And he said simply, "The Holy Spirit."

I said, "Well, what is the Holy Spirit?" Seven years old.

He said, "The Holy Spirit is like a butterfly. You know how a butterfly goes from flower to flower giving a little bit of goodness in each one? Well, that's what the Holy Spirit does for people."

I said, "I'll baptize you this Sunday."

While Jesus is over alone, on his knees, still wet from the Jordan, the Spirit lands on him. Comes down, Luke tells us, in bodily form like a dove. He is the only Gospel writer to make sure we know, beyond any doubt, that that spirit is tangible and real. Like a dove.

A dove. I don't know. Luke's a good writer...but I don't know if I would have gone with a dove. A dove brings to mind an image of peace, tranquility, gentleness. Little white bird, soft feathers, makes cooing sounds. Or was it...as Barbara Brown Taylor writes... a dove with claws.

One day last summer I was standing at the kitchen window watching our birdfeeder. Sparrows, chickadees, nuthatches fluttering happily around. The sun shone, the sky was a lovely blue.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a hawk swooped in, talons out, wings beating, and snatches a sparrow. The hawk, a bird of prey, clutched that little sparrow in its claws and took it into the woods.

I think that the spirit, that day at the Jordan, was more like the hawk at my birdfeeder. Talons out, wings beating. It landed on Jesus, held him, didn't let him go.

In fact, it never let go. From that moment on, Jesus was forever held by the spirit. The first words of his public ministry when he stands up in the synagogue are, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" and his last words from the cross are, "Into your hands, I commend my spirit". Jesus. Held by the spirit.

Luke uses a particular word more often than any other Gospel writer—more often than Paul even. It is the word "repent". I always thought repent meant feel bad about yourself and admit what a sinner you are and start doing a better job. No. That is not what repent means at all.

Repent is a verb. An imperative, a command. *Repent*. It means "go in a new direction". Change the course of your life. Turn around. Find a new path.

When Don and I were first married, we bought a GPS. It was one of the first ones and instead of a calm and cultured voice giving directions, you could set it to have a cartoon voice. For some reason, Don gave it the voice of Rocky the squirrel from Rocky and Bullwinkle.

It had all sorts of funny expressions that it would shout at you while you were driving, like "hey let's stop for peanut brittle" or "you drive like my Uncle Fred, and he was a flying squirrel!" But when you took a wrong turn or missed an exit, instead of serenely saying "recalculating" the squirrel would shout, "Hang on, I'll get you out of here!"

Repent is God's way of saying "hang on, I'll get you out of here." Turn around, go in a new direction. Find your new path. I'll send the spirit—it'll carry you. It'll hold you.

That day at the Jordan, Jesus repented. Scholars have long debated why Jesus had to be baptized and had to repent. He had nothing to repent of, right? But what if repentance isn't about sin and it is about changing one's direction. Jesus was about to launch on a new journey. Follow a new map in life. Hang on, God said, I'll get you out of here. Out of here and into the world where you will heal and save, teach and redeem. Up out of those baptismal waters to begin a new journey. A trek that started at the river and ended at the cross. From life to death to life again. *The hawk takes him into the woods.*

When the spirit grabs you, when it pulls you into its grasp, things change. Things happen. New directions are taken.

Early one Sunday morning, years ago, I headed to my favorite coffee shop with only two goals—a mocha cappuccino and the Sunday *New York Times*. The morning was colder than I had anticipated when I left my house, and the coffee shop suddenly seemed far away. I stopped on the sidewalk for a moment and found myself standing in front of a church. I noticed that even on this blustery Sunday morning, the church's front door stood propped open. That open door spoke of welcome. I crossed the street and stepped inside. I had not been in a church for nearly ten years. Sliding into a back pew, I breathed deeply as the opening hymn swept over me, and I think, the spirit took hold.

A new direction for my life began in the warmth of that welcoming church. A new direction that led to ordination in the United Church of Christ—a call to ministry that I had abandoned fifteen years earlier. The spirit held me as I followed God's call to a church in rural Iowa.

After ten years of parish work in Iowa, another new direction and Don and I moved back to New England. And here I am today, standing before you, in the pulpit of First Church.

Never underestimate what the spirit can work with.

Are you held by the spirit? Are you in its embrace? Does the spirit guide you and direct you?

Because the spirit is the only hope you have if you want to truly follow in the footsteps of Christ.

To be a person who stands their ground.

To live out the words of the Gospel day after day.

To love one another as God has loved you.

Spirit held.

You and I are about to embark on a journey together. *Well, you haven't voted yet. I mean you did come in here with expectations.*

Although this church is thriving and filled with an amazing amount of activity, I am sure that things like membership and outreach and numbers of pledges are on your minds.

First Church is not in decline, but many churches are. So many in fact that the steady drop in church attendance says to some that the church is on its way out, that it will die. The Lutherans have tracked its demise. They have predicted that the last Lutheran church will close in March of 2049.

But I don't believe it. Why? Because the church is held by the spirit.

When the spirit landed on Jesus, snatched him like a hawk looking for dinner, it held on. It never released him. He was held by the spirit as he fed the poor, healed the sick, taught the people, broke bread at the Last Supper. It stayed with him from the cold waters of the Jordan to the cold night of the cross.

And that same spirit holds us. You and me. This congregation.

We are the church, the body of Christ.

Spirit held.

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