

“An invitation to the Holy Spirit”

A Sermon for The Baptism of our Lord

(The first Sunday after Epiphany)

Based on Genesis 1.1-5 and Mark 1.4-11 (&12)

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Those of us who have learned the Lectio Davina
or African Bible Study method
know the art of reading scripture,
noticing what stands out,
and contemplating what it might be saying to us
in our current context.

As I read today's service, I was not only struck,
but struck with substantial discomfort at a word in our next hymn.
The hymn is “When Jesus came to Jordan”
It was written by the famous British Methodist minister
and hymnodist Fred Pratt Green.
The first two verses are lovely,
Then the third verse says
“Come, Holy Spirit, aid us to keep the vows we make.”
All good so far.
But then we will sing
“this very day INVADE us and every bondage break”.

I expect that all of us have things that bind us
and that we would like to be free of.

But I took an instant objection to the idea of the Holy Spirit
being so aggressive as to invade us.

Why did this bother me so much?

I wonder if it has ever bothered anyone else.

As I pondered the idea of the Holy Spirit invading us,
I thought of the old TV show “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy”.
For those of you not familiar with the show,
it was about five guys with exceptional talent for styling
both homes and people.

The target of their attention each week,
was nominated by someone close to them.

If the nominee was willing
he literally gave permission for these five guys to invade his life.
They then decluttered and styled his home.
They changed the way he dressed.
They changed his grooming.
They counselled him about the things that were holding him back.
None of this would have been possible
without him giving permission for their invasion to take place.
All the nominees and those they loved
were delighted with the results.
In this sense invasion was a positive thing.

In talking about the show this week,
my son told me that the show has been recreated for Netflix.
I watched one episode out of curiosity.
I was left wondering where God was leading me with this sermon.

The guy getting the makeover was a Lutheran Pastor in Philadelphia
who had recently come out as gay.

His congregation had invited the show to makeover
not only their pastor (who they loved),
but to also makeover their church and rectory.

The guys even painted the walls of the sanctuary deep purple
making the stained-glass windows even more beautiful.

Their invasion of place and person was truly transformational.

I became fascinated about why this word “invade”
troubled me so much.

I think mostly of the Holy Spirit as our comforter and our teacher.

I had actually been only slightly curious about Dean Frank Nelson’s use
of the word “invasion” in his sermon at the Cathedral last Sunday.

His opening line was

“The extraordinary claim of Christmas
is that God has invaded the world.”

Unlike the distressing news reports this week
of Americans invading Capitol Hill,
Dean Frank went onto say
“Instead of wanting to kill and destroy,
to seize and to claim as theirs what belongs to others,
God’s Christmas invasion is one of astonishing generosity.
The gift given is the Giver. The Word became flesh.”

An optional prayer for today’s Prayer of the Day
has a similar sentiment to the
“When Jesus came to Jordan” hymn.

It says
“Spirit of energy and change,
in whose power Jesus was anointed to be the hope of the nations:
be poured out also upon us without reserve or distinction,
that we may have confidence to implant your justice on the earth;
through Jesus Christ. Amen.”

This prayer has us ask the Holy Spirit
to be “poured out upon us”
In speaking with Dean Frank this week,
he reminded me that “Water is such an important part of baptism
– think of how water ‘invades’ –
For example, when the water seeps along into the desert
bringing such utter transformation;
or floods down after heavy rains”.

We read about the power of the Holy Spirit
in our Old Testament reading from Genesis this morning
where we find in the very first sentence of the Bible
“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,
the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep,
while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”
Right in the very beginning we find the Holy Spirit,
here described as “a wind from God” creating order from chaos.

Today’s Gospel reading is about Jesus being baptised
In a baptism of repentance by John the Baptist
As he emerges from the water
“he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on
him. And a voice came from heaven
“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

The tone of the following verse is completely different:
“And the Spirit **immediately drove** him out into the wilderness.”
Here we see the Holy Spirit being insistent that the wilderness
was the place that Jesus needed to be next.
Imagine how different our lives would be if he had refused.

As we invite the Holy Spirit with those powerful words
in Frank Pratt Green’s hymn
I urge us to consider our commitment to the invitation.
Are we really inviting the Holy Spirit
to invade our lives, to give our inner lives a make-over?
Are we still committed to the covenant we made at our confirmation,
to boldly confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour?

A prayer you may like to pray is the
Prayer of Abandonment by Charles de Foucauld.

“Father, I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you:
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul;
I offer it to you
with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord,
and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands,
without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father. **Amen.**”

We may be uncomfortable with the word invade
and yet the nominees in the TV show did surrender
to an invasion in their lives.
Let’s not just allow the Holy Spirit to be with us
Or to indwell within us
As we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord today
Let’s like Jesus, surrender to the transforming power
of the Holy Spirit. Amen.