

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Scott Kenefake, Interim Pastor**  
**“Called to Serve”**  
**Mark 1:4-11, Acts 19:1-7**  
**Baptism of the Lord**  
**January 7, 2018**

**Prayer for Illumination**

God, source of all light, by your Word you give light to the soul. Pour out on us the spirit of wisdom and understanding that our hearts and minds may be opened. Amen.

**Mark 1:9-11**

<sup>9</sup>In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

**Acts 19:1-7**

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. <sup>2</sup>He said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” They replied, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” <sup>3</sup>Then he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They answered, “Into John’s baptism.” <sup>4</sup>Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.” <sup>5</sup>On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup>When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied—<sup>7</sup>altogether there were about twelve of them.

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In New Harmony, Indiana, there is a modern place of prayer called the *Roofless Church*. It has four defining walls, but there no roof. It sits open to the elements. It was created under the inspiration of Jane Blaffer Owen (1915-2010).

You see, over fifty years ago, well in advance of today’s earth awareness movement, Jane Owen saw that our sacred sites must not be represented by separation from the elements. Our holy gathering spaces must not be characterized by division from the creatures and from earth’s other peoples and religious traditions.

At the heart of the *Roofless Church* is a sculpture by the Lithuanian Jewish artist *Jacques Lipchitz* (1891-1973). It is called *The Descent of the Spirit*. In the form of a dove the Spirit descends onto an *abstract divine feminine form* that opens to give birth. At one level Lipchitz is pointing to the Jesus story, conceived by the Spirit in the womb of Mary. At another level he is pointing to the universe story (Genesis 1—an unread lectionary reading for today). Everything is conceived by the Spirit in the womb of the cosmos. Everything is sacred. (Original Blessing).

Interestingly, Jane Owen met Lipchitz in New York City at the end of the Second World War through the German-American theologian, Paul Tillich (1886-1965). Lipchitz had escaped Nazi-occupied France with the help of a Roman Catholic priest in Plateau d’Assy. But even before his escape, he had conceived the idea of this sculpture—and in New York he shared his vision with Jane Owen.

She commissioned him to create three castes of the piece. One was to be in the *Roofless Church* of New Harmony. The second was to be in the parish church of Assy in France. And the third was to be in the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.

Now, the Cathedral leaders agreed in principle to feature the sculpture, but when they saw it, they refused to accept it. It was too *explicit* in its representation of the *Divine Feminine* opening to give birth. So, instead, they commissioned another artist to create a statue of *George Washington* riding a horse!

The young Jane Owen was upset by their refusal. She went to New York to pour out her soul to a religious sister who told her there was someone visiting from Scotland whom she should meet. His name was *George MacLeod* (1895-1991). He and his young Scottish community were in the midst of rebuilding *Iona Abbey*.

Jane said to George, “*The third cast belongs on Iona.*” To which George replied, “*We Presbyterians would find it difficult to live with a sculpture of Our Lady, but if she were to arrive with a dowry we would find it easier to live with her.*”

So she arrived with a dowry, and that dowry paid for the rebuilding of the cloisters of Iona Abbey.

George MacLeod was right, of course. Scottish Presbyterians would not find it easy—at least in the 1950’s—to live with a sculpture of *Our Lady*, and especially its explicit birthing form. Nor would they find it easy to live with Lipchitz’s name for the piece, *Our Lady of Delight*. In fact, (at that time) they likely didn’t know what to do with *delight* either! So MacLeod renamed the sculpture *The Descent of the Spirit*. And there she sits in the cloisters of Iona Abbey to this day.<sup>1</sup>

Let’s think about this in terms of our Gospel reading for today: *The Baptism of Jesus*:

In the story we have the elements: *earth, water, air (wind)*; we have *the Spirit*, descending through a ruptured sky like a dove, a bird fluttering—renewing, re-birthing, re-creating. It is, in a sense, a Cathedral of *Earth, Water, and Sky*—right there on the banks of the Jordan River!

You should know that *ritual washing* was a tradition associated with synagogue worship. In fact, excavated first-century synagogues show clear evidence of spaces *outside* the entrances for the purification rites that required water. And by the time of Jesus, Jews were apparently welcoming Gentile converts through a ritual washing, a *baptisma*.

According to tradition, John the Baptizer insisted that Judeans should consider themselves to be as distant from God *as Gentiles*. So, to be counted among God’s people, they should *repent* and be readmitted to the community as if they were Gentiles, that is, they should be baptized.<sup>2</sup>

But note that when Jesus submits to this baptism by John there is an *epiphany* (manifestation) that takes place that consists of two parts: a *vision* (10) and a *voice* (11).

The *vision* is more vivid in Greek than in English:

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<sup>1</sup> John Phillip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God*, Skylight Paths Publishing, Woodstock, VT, 2014, pp. 3-4

<sup>2</sup> James Rowe Adams, *The Essential Reference Book for Biblical Metaphors*, Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, OH, 2005, p. 40

*“As Jesus was coming up out of the water he saw the heavens in the process of being ripped apart.”*

The Greek implies an act of God, and the verb is the same used of the Temple curtain which was “*torn in two from top to bottom*” when Jesus died (15:38).

The split heavens point to the *cosmic* significance of this baptism.

In other words, what had long been sealed is suddenly flung open. Jesus’ ministry answers to the long deferred hope, “*O that you would rend the heavens and come down*” (Isa. 64:1).

The *content* of the vision is the descent of the Spirit as a dove. The descent of the dove on Jesus at his baptism shows that he is one greater than John, who will baptize his followers with the *Spirit* (1:7-8).

And the **voice** from heaven attests that Jesus is the Son of God.

Note that in Mark (unlike Matthew and John), both the *vision* and the *voice* are intended for Jesus alone. This is a secret epiphany. Jesus knows who he is by means of an experience that is not accessible to objective, public verification. Others must discover this truth by listening to what Jesus says and by watching what he does. The centurion who watches Jesus die (15:39) will confess publicly what here is revealed privately: Jesus is the Son of God.<sup>3</sup>

What is the significance of all this for us? Why does it matter?

Two things: (1) the basic significance of the baptism passage is still its witness to the identity of Jesus. As a secret epiphany, it tells the reader the true identity of Jesus. (2) the baptism of Jesus’ disciples (followers/learners) establishes **our** identity. Jesus is who God says he is. So also **we** are who God says we are, and in Christ Jesus we are sons and daughters of God, for (as Paul said) as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal. 3:26-27).

However, the identity declared at our baptism is only **a word** until it is revealed with convincing power (love) in the unfolding of our lives ... and our deaths ... and resurrections.<sup>4</sup>

And so, as we renew our baptismal vows today—and as we ordain and install new church officers (Elders and Deacons)--I want to leave you with some wise words from John Phillip Newell that point to the kind of spiritual transformation that baptism implies:

*“On the isle of Iona there is a sixteen-foot-high stone-carved cross from the tenth century called St. Martin’s Cross. It stands in front of the Abbey. In Christianity the cross historically has been our most prominent symbol. The word **symbol** is derived from the Greek **sumbolon**, meaning “to throw together.” A symbol is a throwing together of the known and the unknown, of what can be expressed with what is inexpressible.*

*In this case it is taking what we know, a cross, and throwing it together with what is beyond definition, **love**. In Christianity the cross becomes a symbol of God’s love, a symbol of the inexplicable. Because we are made of God, it also becomes a symbol of what is unutterable or indefinable in us, our longing for love and our capacity in love to endure all things.*

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<sup>3</sup> Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, John Knox Press, Atlanta, GA, 1983, pp. 33, 34

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 34-35

*(Carl) Jung says that the cross is the Christian totality symbol. Essentially it is a mandala, an ancient representation of wholeness, or the totality of all things. Say we draw a circle around it, as the community of John the Beloved did in Asia Minor in its early cross design with equidistant vertical and horizontal lines touching the surrounding circle. The Celtic tradition later did the same thing by placing a circle superimposed over the heart of the cross.*

*With this added design element, the cross' mandala feature becomes apparent. It has four quadrants and four primary points. We see north and south, east and west. We see the above and the below, the left and the right. In the cross these opposites are joined. It is a way of saying that heaven and earth, East and West, the Divine and the human, the life of one nation and the life of its polar opposite, can be brought together.*

*The place where the lines intersect is the heart of the cross. The only force that has the power to truly bring together the apparent opposites in our lives and our world is love.*

*The cross points to the love that so endured in Jesus for the poorest and most powerless of his people that he found the strength to go to Jerusalem to confront the holders of false power in his nation. It points to the love that so lived in Gandhi and Archbishop Oscar Romero, in civil rights activist Rosa Parks (1913-2005), and in countless others who, knowing the likely cost of their passion for justice—the threat of imprisonment or death—nevertheless continued on their chosen pathway.*

*It is a love that we have experienced in those who have been most faithful to us in our families and friendships and that we most long for in the midst of brokenness and fragmentation in our lives and world.<sup>5</sup>*

Friends, that is why the Celtic high-standing cross, rooted firmly in the earth and standing tall in the great cathedral of nature, beckons us to join the yearning that is all things—**this is what we all have been called to bear witness to live out—and our baptism bears witness to this.**

*"We know," says Paul, that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now (Rms. 8:22). Our yearning is part of a cosmic yearning, to live in oneness.*

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> John Phillip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God*, Skylight Paths Publishing, Woodstock, VT, 2014, pp. 106-109