

In the first episode of The Chosen, Mary Magdalene is shown in the throes of her struggle with the demons that had taken possession of her life. As she descended deeper and deeper into that horror, she decided in a lucid moment when the demons were not controlling her that she did not want to live that way any longer. So she headed to a cliff at the edge of Lake Galilee. But as she stood there tempted to end her suffering in one rash act, she heard a fluttering sound above her. When she looked up, she saw a dove. The dove circled her and darted in the direction of town.

Then it returned, and did the same thing several more times. As Mary watched it, she seemed to feel it was trying to lead her somewhere. So she followed it away from the cliff. The episode then shifted to another part of the storyline. But after that scene, the focus of the episode shifted back to Mary. She was sitting in a tavern in town - but still distraught.

Then the miracle occurred. Jesus approached her. He spoke to her. The demons possessing her seemed to sense His presence and became agitated. And that agitated Mary, who said to Him "*leave me alone*" and tried to flee. But Jesus followed her, and called her by the name no one had used for her since she was a child: "*Mary of Magdala.*" "*Who are you?*" she asked. And more importantly "*How do you know my name?*" Jesus then repeated a verse from the prophet Isaiah that gave her comfort and hope as a child: "*Thus says the Lord who created you. And He who formed you. FEAR NOT, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You . . . are . . . mine.*" And through those words the demons were driven out of her.

While the cliff scene is not in the Bible, the use of a dove in the portrayal of Mary's healing is an allusion to the fact that in the Old Testament there are a number of passages that speak of God's leading, God's protection, and God's presence with His people through the use of a dove. And in the New Testament, the leading, protection, and presence of God through the image of the dove is linked to the 3rd person of the Trinity: the Holy Spirit. We heard one example of that in the passage from Luke. But the first use of the dove to speak about such things is of course the story of Noah. In Genesis 7, we are told how God flooded the earth. Then in Genesis 8, we are told that "*God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and sent a wind over the earth,*" and because of the wind "*the water receded steadily.*"

Eventually, the ark came to rest on Mount Ararat, and Noah sent out a raven to see how much the waters had receded. When it returned to the ark, Noah knew the waters were still too high to leave the ark. Then Noah sent out a dove, and the dove returned to him because the waters were still too high for it to find a place to perch. Seven days later, Noah sent out the dove again. This time it came back with an olive leaf in its mouth. So Noah knew the waters were getting close to receding enough that they could finally leave the ark.

That story began the development of the idea of the dove representing God's leading, God's protection, and God's presence with His people. That is because through the dove, God led Moses and his family out of the ark. Through the dove, God assured Noah that just as the ark had protected him and his family from the flood waters, God would continue to protect them when they left the ark. And through the dove, God promised Noah that he and his family would not be alone as they

ventured out into a new world - and then gave them the image of the rainbow to additionally remind them of His leading, His protection, and His presence.

In the time of Moses, God used the image of the dove to speak of His leading, His protection, and His presence with His people by saying those who were too poor to offer the sacrifice of a lamb could bring *“two turtledoves, one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering.”* That is because God wanted His people to know His leading, His protection, and His presence were not just extended to the rich, or the elite, but to everyone. In the psalms, God also spoke about His leading, His protection, and His presence. In Psalm 68, for instance, the writer states how he felt trapped and afraid, and then wrote *“oh that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest - I would flee far away and stay in the desert; I would hurry to my place of shelter, far from the tempest and storm.”* For the psalmist understood that his ‘place of shelter’ wasn’t a ‘place’ at all, but God. Which we see stated clearly in Psalm 91 which promised that God *“will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge.”*

The image of the dove comes up again in chapter 2 of Luke gospel when he writes that *“Joseph and Mary took [Jesus] to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, ‘every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord’), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: ‘a pair of doves.’”* Then we get to the passage before us where Jesus is baptized by John. In that story we are told that John had gone out into *“the country around the Jordan . . . preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”* We are told the crowds came out to him *“to be baptized by him.”* And finally, we are told *“when all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove.”*

In bodily form LIKE a dove, Luke says. By using the word “like” Luke is making an allusion to all those previous biblical statements where God’s leading, protection, and presence are spoken about through the image of a dove. Whether the Holy Spirit actually came upon Jesus in that moment in a form that looked like a dove, or this was just poetic license in describing an important event in the life of Jesus, we don’t know for sure. What we do know is the use of the image of the dove was not accidental. For in Jesus, God was saying in the most powerful way He could that His leading, protection, and presence is available to all people and not just some.

After telling you all of that, I have a bit of a shock for you: doves do not exist. Doves are just pigeons. They are not some separate species, or even a special breed within the pigeon species. Which is why doves can be described like the rest of the pigeon population as nothing more than flying rats. There also seems to be nothing special about the dove’s behaviors that forced God to use it as a symbol of His leading, His protection, or His presence. And definitely nothing special about it that it would be a required image for the Holy Spirit.

But for some reason, God chose this strange little bird to be a symbol of such things. And even more importantly, God chose it to draw us - like Mary in that episode of The Chosen - away from the cliffs we can find ourselves standing at in despair because of the suffering our own figurative demons have

unleashed on us. And the reason for that is the image of the dove (and its picture of God's leading, protection, and presence through the Holy Spirit) puts an invitation in front of us - just as it did for Mary in the episode of The Chosen. That invitation is to turn away from the pigeons that lead us to cliffs of despair and to follow the Holy Spirit to experience the leading, protection, and presence God offers us in the midst of the chaos of this fallen and sinful world.

For God says to us on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday "*Thus says the Lord who created you. And He who formed you. FEAR NOT, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You . . . are . . . mine.*" So on this day that we remember the baptism of Jesus, God invites us to remember our own baptism. God invites us to remember that in our baptism He who created us, and He who formed us, offers to redeem us from all the things that threaten to separate us from Him. And God invites us to have no fear for He has called us by name because we are not only His children, but His ambassadors to a lost and dying world.

To respond to such promises, however, and to benefit from God's promise to lead us, protect us, and be present to us in each and every moment of life (whether good or bad), we need to make choices. We need to make commitments. And we need to then ask God for the grace to follow through on those choices and commitments. In the imagery I have spoken about today, we have to decide to leave behind the life of a pigeon to live the life of a dove. This means living a life of holiness rather than sin. It means living a life that is guided by God's will and not our own. It means seeking God instead of the idols that so easily distract us and garner our attention. For while the image of a dove is just a romanticized version of what is actually just a pigeon, God - by His leading, His protection, and His presence - offers to transform us fallen and sinful creatures into new creations, into holy beings, and into His children so we can be ambassadors to a lost and dying world.

We hear this fact echoed in a book by Eliane Wilson titled The Lost Dove of Peace. The book tells how the world that God created to be at peace had deteriorated to the point that it was full of death and destruction. In response, the doves of the world left their homes, whether they were painted and inked, sculpted and woven into tapestries, or actually alive in the wild, and held a summit conference at the Mount of Olives. The gathering was named "The Great Council of the Doves." After lengthy discussion of how bad the world had become, the doves agreed to a grand mission: to venture out into the midst of the death and destruction to find the lost Dove of Peace from Noah's ark.

The dove elder that had called them together warned that the journey would be arduous. But he also promised that in each place they traveled they would find a mechanism for peace that had lain dormant, been forgotten, or gone underground. As the journeys of different doves are then told, they all come to the same conclusion: the secret of the Dove of Peace "*lies in love and compassion.*" The book then ends with the admonition for each reader to be a dove of peace through acts of love and compassion. Not that this is easy to do however.

In fact, without the power of God's grace it is impossible. We see this in the book Following Jesus Without Embarrassing God. In that book, Tony Campolo tells the story of a man who went to a pet store. As he was looking for what he wanted, he heard a ruckus. After listening to the sound start

and stop several times, curiosity got the best of him, and he heading in the direction of the sound. But at the back of the store, all he found was a cage containing two white birds. A sign on the cage identified them as “*Sacred Doves of Peace*,” so he assumed they could not have been the source of the ruckus. But then, as he turned to leave, he heard the sound again. Spinning around, he watched as the “*Sacred Doves of Peace*” beat each other to a pulp!

As we gather today as the Body of Christ, the Church, we therefore have choices to make. We have commitments we need to uphold. And we have responses to give to God’s calling to live as His children so we can be His ambassadors to a lost and dying world. As we do so, we can consider our church to be a sort of “Council of the Doves.” For in today’s service we have heard the promise that God offers us His leading, His protection, and His miraculous and life-changing presence in our lives if we will follow the ways the Dove of Peace lays out before us each day instead of allowing our fallen and sinful nature to cause us to beat others to a pulp.

To do that, we need - like Mary Magdalene in that first episode of The Chosen - to be willing to listen for the fluttering wings of the Holy Spirit. We need to be willing - like Mary - to look up to see where the Holy Spirit is trying to take us. And then, when we get to where the Holy Spirit is taking us, we need - like Mary - to be willing to not only listen for Jesus to speak to us but then respond to what He says without fear. For the God who created us, He who formed us, has already redeemed us. And each and every day He therefore seeks to call us by name to come to Him and live through Him so we might not fear but be His ambassadors to a lost and dying world. So make the choice this day to be a dove and not just a pigeon. For that way of life is not only why you were baptized, but why you are called this day to remember your baptism.