

Baptismal Bird- Called by a new name; Luke 3: 16 -17; 21 -22
Set free by truth

May 25, 08

There was once a wedding here at Runnymede where the bride and groom had the good idea of releasing pigeons as a symbolic gesture of joy and new life.

They did so on the lawn outside the church. It was great for the pigeons, I'm sure, but nobody thought to close the sanctuary doors and windows and some of the pigeons found their way in. And there was a great "to do" in getting them out again.

It was late in the day and the light was fading, but our caretaker, Bob, as he was closing up the sanctuary, could just make out the shape of a bird in the corner of the chancel area, here.

So, he scurried off to grab a box. Fortunately the bird was still there when he got back, and ever so quietly, he snuck up on it, and pounced with the box over the bird. Imagine his surprise when he discovered that he had just caught the bronze bird on the baptismal font.

What is a bird doing on the font in the first place? It IS kind of unusual, you'll admit. The artist was not thinking particularly of the dove that symbolizes the Holy Spirit, though that could be what this symbolizes.

He was thinking of the mystery of a bird, any bird – that functions in more than one element- in the air, and on the ground- it seems to mark that mysterious interaction between the spiritual world and the earthly world, that is opened to us in baptism.

When a bird alights near us, instinctively we go "ssh", and we're still, we want to capture the moment, extend it, we feel graced in some way that a wild creature has come near, is trusting us. It's as though in that moment a window is opened to that other realm, something "other" is there for us, if we could just grasp it.

In our baptisms, the holy spirit alights in this way, and this marks the beginning of a life journey of wonder and awe at a God who comes so close to us, and who beckons us into new realms and ways of living.

In the sixties and seventies, the hero of a popular book was a bird- some of you may be old enough to remember Jonathan Livingstone Seagull- it became a kind of cult book on freedom- it was about a seagull who believed in himself. He believed that if he practiced and persevered, he could fly higher and swoop deeper than any other seagull.

And in the story he managed to overcome what seemed to be the restrictions of being a seagull. As young people we truly believed that we could change the world, and change ourselves- through vision, striving, perseverance.

I certainly believed that together with others, I could right the wrongs in the world- the inequities, the injustice, the hatred, violence and cruelty, the whole culture of dominance, the hierarchies, the divisions, and so much wrong with myself.

And we did strive together to set the world free. Without great effect, I should add.

And then as the old gospel song says, Jesus came into my life. In my early explorations of Christianity, I was drawn to the words on a bookmark which said, "Freedom for the tree is not freedom from the soil".

I knew of course this was true, but had no idea what the Christian implications of this were. I didn't know then that Jesus came to root us, to root us in God, the ground of our being, so that we could be truly free. Free to be what God intends us to be.

I didn't know that this happens through the Holy Spirit. In this morning's scripture , after Jesus baptism, when he is praying, the Holy Spirit alights on him, like a dove.

In the gospel of Luke when this bird like being alights on Jesus, the WHOLE HEAVENS open, and the message that Jesus hears from that other realm is "You are my Son, my beloved. And I am delighted with you"

He spends 40 days in the wilderness struggling with what this message means- to be called, Son of God, beloved one, one in whom God delights.

He concludes that it does NOT mean being free from the constraints of a human being. He chooses instead to embrace his humanity, every step of the way,- to the last agonizing gasp on the cross.

And in doing so he makes a way for us to follow, not by trying to become more than human, not striving to be perfect, but rather, like Jesus, by allowing the Holy Spirit to root us and ground us in God. So that God can grow us, shape us, into our true selves.

And this being rooted in God begins at our baptism: like Jesus, we too are called by our true name, "child of God".

Through Isaiah God says, "I have called you by name, you are mine " In Isaiah 62 , God says, "you shall be called by a NEW name that the mouth of the

Lord shall give You. You will no longer be called forsaken, desolate. But you shall be called “my delight is in her”

The very words God uses to name Jesus: “the one in whom I delight. “ The same name God gives us in our baptism. “The one in whom God delights”. And God sends the Holy Spirit as God’s “Amen,” as God’s seal on our new name, God’s way of saying, “And let it be so!” And through the Holy Spirit in us, it becomes so.

Our challenge is to accept. To adopt our new name, to leave behind the negative judgments and attitudes of others and to live out of the truth that we are God’s beloved.

As I thought about this gift of a new name, a scene from a movie kept coming to my mind: shown on TV a few years ago. Called Wallenberg: story of a hero.

Raoul Wallenberg was a Swedish diplomat during the second world war, dedicated to saving Jews from extermination. Basically what he did was issue Swedish passports to Jews. Sweden being a neutral country. Very official looking yellow and blue documents that impressed the Nazis.

Through his boldness and unorthodox methods, he is credited with saving 100,000 Jews. I tried to find the exact facts of the scene that I remembered in the movie. So I did some research on the internet. I came across a number of stories:

One example of his unorthodox methods- There was a train filled with Jews about to leave for Auschwitz. And Wallenberg climbs onto the roof the train and hands down protective passes through the doors which are not yet sealed.

Guards fire at him, but he keeps handing out the passes. One account of this event spoke of guards deliberately firing over his head- they were so impressed with his courage. Then of course he demands that everyone with a Swedish passport be allowed to leave the carriages. And he gets away with it.

Another story is told by Wallenberg’s messenger boy, Joni Moser. 800 Jewish men are being marched to Mauthausen. Wallenberg asks all those with Swedish passports to raise their hands, while Joni runs amongst them telling them to raise their hands whether they have a passport or not, and Wallenberg claims custody of all those who raise their hands.

I think this was the scene that I remembered in the movie, (but perhaps it was a completely different event) the way I remembered it, Wallenberg reads out a

list of names of people who supposedly had passports- all totally fictitious names of course-

He grabs a man, addresses him by name as though he knows him, - kicks him into line- trying to get the message across to the other men that they should answer to the names he calls out, even though it's not their name.

And one by one they begin to twig on to what he's doing and they respond. And it's this that stayed with me.. Because of the thought- what if? What if they had not grasped what he was doing? What if they had not been prepared to answer to a new name? What if?

Those who responded lived. The others did not.

What if God has come to us, like a bird alighting for a moment on a branch?
 What if God in this moment, is opening for us new possibilities, new life?
 What if God is giving us a new name? Calling us by that new name? Longing for us to answer, to join the ranks of those God wants to set free?

What if we do not recognize that it's us whom God is calling?

What if we cling to our old name, desolate, forsaken one? What if we do not answer to the new name, child of God? Loved by God? The one in whom God delights?

Those who respond, those who are willing to walk with a new name, a name that God gives, will walk to freedom. And the new name that God gives is not fictitious, it is our true name. Because it is spoken by God, it carries the power to bring into effect what it says.

When we say "yes", I will answer to that name, "beloved by God", we join the ranks of those who walk with God to freedom, When we say yes, "I'm a child of God", the Holy Spirit is able to enter in, to begin to root us in God so that we can grow into our new name- and begin to show a family likeness.

We'll begin to show those God-like characteristics that Paul talks about as fruits of the Spirit:

We'll become more kind, gentle, patient, long suffering, persevering, humble, generous, self controlled, joyful, peace filled and peace makers, abounding in love -

Indeed we may become more like the Holy Spirit itself, like a bird alighting in this world- as Paul says, in the world but not of the world, like messengers from

another realm, through whom others may sense God's presence and be drawn to God.

Through whom others may hear their true names being called. And so the world REALLY changes- one person at a time being set free; the wrongs of this world are overcome as one person at a time receives the truth of who we are:

Child of God. Beloved one. One in whom God delights.

To God be all the praise the honour and the glory.