

OF MICE AND MOON

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The Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ
January 10, 2010

John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Luke 3:16)

It's been said that more mice than people live in New York City, and after nearly six years in the Grace Church rectory, I believe it. Last summer all the tell-tale signs were suggesting that we had another mouse in the house: scurrying sounds from under the refrigerator, shreds of paper in odd places, droppings on the counter. Since our wonderful old cat is nearly 16 and well past her mousing years, it was time to bait my arsenal of traps and lay them in strategic locations. This I did, only to find more mess and no mouse the next morning and the next. One evening while we were eating dinner, the brazen critter even dashed into the open, snatched a few crumbs from the cat's bowl, and skittered back from whence he came. Enough was enough. That night I set a ring of glue traps completely around the refrigerator so that it would be impossible for the mouse to come out for food without getting stuck. I would get my mouse!

Sure enough, a day or two later my two sons came bursting into my office to announce, "We've caught the mouse!" I went to the kitchen, pulled out one of the glue traps, and there he was: hopelessly stuck, frantically trying to free himself. His days of raiding the kitchen were done. But let me confess something to you: this furry little creature was awfully cute. I could not deny that his big mousy ears, and little black eyes, and tiny twitching nose tugged at my heart. I had heard once that the only way to free a mouse from a glue trap is to douse it liberally with vegetable oil. So with a bottle of Canola in one hand and the mouse stuck to a glue trap in the other, the boys and I went to the far end of the front yard. There, with my holy oil, I anointed him. I drenched him. Do you know what? It worked. He pulled his paws and limbs off the trap and eventually slipped to the grass, completely free. He righted himself and ran to the safety of the ivy just as fast as his oily little legs would carry him. And as for his days of raiding the rectory kitchen? Those wiser in the ways of mice than I have told me that this one probably made it back into the house before I did.

Today is a day on the church calendar known as the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ, and at the 11 am service we present eight candidates for baptism. You will have to bear with me this morning, because I'm going to use two – if not three – rather odd images to help us grapple with the meaning of baptism. The first is the mouse. In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke, John the Baptist is back. In truth, he never went anywhere. We meet him today right where we left him only five weeks ago on the Second Sunday of Advent. The scene is the banks of the Jordan River, where John baptized the multitudes who came to him from the surrounding region. What John was doing was nothing new. Ritual washings were a common custom among many cultures. The Jews practiced proselyte baptism, by which they received Gentiles into the community. In all cases the outward washing with water signified an inward cleansing of the soul. The old was washed away so the candidate was fit and pure to participate in the new. So baptism itself, though not yet Christian, was a familiar practice.

But all was not familiar during the days of John and Jesus. It was a time of political and theological unrest, when revolution always threatened to boil over into the streets. The crowds came out to hear John because they sensed something big was about to happen. Could John be the Messiah who would finally raise up the people to sweep away the Romans and usher in a

new order? If so, they wanted to be ready. In order to prepare themselves to be on the Messiah's side, and participate in the new kingdom he would inaugurate, they submitted themselves to John's baptism. John's preaching as he baptized was clear: he was not the Messiah, and his baptism with water was for the forgiveness of sins. The outward and visible sign was water, and the inward grace was a clean heart and a new start.

Still today the practice of Christian baptism retains an emphasis on the cleansing from sin. But why? The candidates we present today are hardly rogues and scoundrels. They are perfectly nice people and cute babies. So why baptize at all? One part of the answer lies in the vastly unpopular, widely misunderstood doctrine of original sin that bump up against again and again. The doctrine of original sin is merely the church's way of saying that none of us can avoid sin. We can debate forever the question of human nature. Are people basically good? Or are people basically *up* to no good? If people are basically good, then the water of baptism is merely symbolic, at most calling forth something already there. If people are basically not so good, then the water of baptism is effectual, actually washing our sins from us. Which is it? The point is moot. Whether you are good or whether you are up to no good, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Sin is like an inescapable glue trap around and within our fallen, corrupt human existence. You cannot go through this life without getting stuck to it, no matter how hard you try.

Allow me to illustrate. Just last Sunday someone handed me a hymnal that she thought should be removed from the pew and decommissioned. A visitor to the church had taken the liberty of penning a poem in the back cover. The poet claims to be sitting in this place *Alone in spirit*, and then confesses to being *convinced there is no god, no hope, except in the lives we live*. Then the conclusion: *Intentions I have of making [life] more than misery. A life not of darkness*. We can applaud the would-be poet's good intention to remove misery and darkness from life. But at the same time, let me point out the glue trap for what it is: the poet needs to stop defacing church property. Excuse me, Shakespeare: that'll be \$21.00 for the Hymnal! The solution here is not to collect the debt, but to remove the ink. Is it possible? John's baptism with water for the forgiveness of sins says yes, it is possible for God to remove our sins from us. Indeed, last summer, when I saw the mouse, drenched in oil, slide free of the glue trap, I thought of baptism. I took it as a parable of how God cleanses us of our sins and offenses, and even our good intentions gone awry.

In today's Gospel reading, we also hear that John was clear about the limitations of his water baptism. He declared, "*I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire*. And then that very one – then Jesus himself – came to John for baptism. Theologians have long debated why Jesus, who knew no sin, submitted himself to John's baptism for the forgiveness of sins. The general consensus seems to be that through his baptism, Jesus was publicly identifying with the human condition. In order to transform our fallen race, he had to plunge into it. So down into the water he went, transforming the institution of baptism itself. Luke reports that for Jesus, *the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove*. The Spirit had landed. Prior to Jesus, baptism had been all about washing away the old. But with Jesus a new theme, a new inner reality, a new gift is added, and that is the gift of the Holy Spirit. The dove that landed on Jesus shoulder signified new life, new fire, even new poetry written on the old slate wiped clean. The Spirit had landed.

A moment ago I promised you two or three odd images to help us grapple with the meaning of baptism. The dove brings me to the second image. If the first was a mouse, the second is the Moon. From a mouse to the Moon we go. Bear with me! I have always been fascinated by the Apollo space program that took us to the Moon. As you know, the stated goal

of President Kennedy was to land on the Moon and return safely before the end of 1960's. It was to send life to an otherwise lifeless orb in space. Numerous test flights and missions had to occur and new technology had to be invented. Disappointment, disaster, and death would challenge the wisdom of the undertaking. But finally, on July 20, 1969, Mission Control in Houston heard the four words they had labored for a decade to hear: "*The Eagle has landed.*" Six hours later, Neil Armstrong stepped down from the Lunar Module, Eagle, and suddenly the dusty, dead surface of the Moon had life upon it. Later missions would bring more other-worldly, fire-breathing birds to the surface. Astronauts would drive specially equipped cars across the terrain, leaving not just footprints but tire tracks. The Moon had never known, never experienced such life before. The bright blue ball of life from far away had sent its life.

This past week, as I've been thinking about the dove landing on Jesus' shoulder, coupled with the gift of the Spirit that John promised in Jesus, I began considering the lunar landings as an image of baptism. Think about it: as the goal of the Apollo program was to put life on the moon, the desire of God is to land his Spirit on you and me. God's desire is to bring life to our souls and bodies: new life, abundant life, life characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness. These are the fruits of the Spirit that can take root in us and grow when God's Spirit lands. The Spirit has landed, and suddenly the dry and brittle soul has God's life upon it. The gift of the Spirit is the goal of baptism.

When does it happen? When do we receive the new life of the Spirit that we believe is our gift through baptism? I must confess, it would be nice if the inward and spiritual grace arrived conveniently and predictably every time within the outward and visible form. I do sometimes wish that the waters of baptism, or the bread and wine of the Eucharist would produce in all who receive them an unmistakable awareness of God's presence and power. The reality is, the Spirit of God cannot be manipulated by ritual, or constrained by matter. The Biblical witness shows that the gift of the Spirit, while always connected to the waters of baptism, sometimes occurs before it, and sometimes after it. If you are still waiting, if you are somewhere between the waters of baptism and the fire of the Spirit, take heart: the Lord keeps his promises forever. God will make his presence known. The Spirit will land.

Have you heard that we're going back to the moon? You may recall that I promised you two or three strange images to help us think about baptism. I'm going for three. The first was a mouse, the second was the Apollo landings on the Moon, and now the third is this: we're going back to the Moon. The initial steps occurred only last November, when NASA deliberately crashed two satellites into the south pole of the Moon. The purpose was to raise up a great plume of dust and determine if any water is there. Do you know what they discovered? Lots and lots of water – frozen beneath the polar surface. What it means is that when life lands on the Moon again, we will call forth from the Moon the very thing necessary to support life: water. To be sure, for the Moon to be anything more than a dead, dusty world, it needs life to arrive from outside of itself. But at the same time, what the external agent will do is unlock a hidden grace already there.

Are people basically good? Or are people basically *up* to no good? Well, if even the Moon can yield springs of water, perhaps the question is not so cut and dry. To me, it's all a parable of how the Spirit of God, through the sacrament of baptism, goes to work on human nature. God brings his life from beyond us, and God calls forth his life from within us. The Scottish theologian, John Maquarrie put it well when he wrote that in the waters of baptism, and in the bread and wine of the Eucharist,

The veil is lifted, God makes himself known, and where hearts are ready and waiting, the sign is received. Such moments are sacramental, and are possible *because* there is an

objective reality reaching out to us and *because* we are given the capacity and the grace to respond. (From A Guide to the Sacraments, 1998. *Italics mine.*)

The Spirit will land on you and me. And as for the mouse? He goes free.

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