

Dove adds dimension to Baptism

FUGGY PUDDING, sugarplums and chestnuts — Christmas giftwraps a variety of symbols. They each carry some deep meaning, but together they bring us into another time and space. Some symbols simply signify the sweet warmth of love amidst winter's cold. Others proclaim love's origin, Jesus Christ.

The Gospels for the next two Sunday's present symbols of Christmas.

After we celebrate the day it takes weeks to understand the mystery. Two hallmarks of the season are the star of Epiphany and the dove of the Baptism of the Lord.

Epiphany recalls the visit of the magi (Matthew 2:1-2). Herod has heard about a newborn king and plots to kill the infant. He enlists the magi as unwitting accomplices to finger the Christ child. The disingenuous Herod has them find the child so he may "go and pay homage." You half expect him to sell them some property in Florida. The magi find the child beneath a miraculous star.

The star does not merely function like an early searchlight. It conceals another story.

THE STAR APPEARS previously in the book of Numbers (22-24). Moses is marching the Israelites toward the promised land with God at his side. They have just wasted the Amorites when Balak, the king of Moab, fears the same fate. He sends for Balaam, a kind of secular prophet you rent by the hour. Balak the king asks Balaam the prophet to pray for an oracle, return, and curse Israel. However, when Balaam prays, he's in a pickle. God tells him that Israel is blessed, not cursed.

The story gets sidetracked at his point when Balaam's donkey talks to him. If you like *Mr. Ed*, you can look up this part on your own.

When Balaam finally approaches the king he delivers four oracles. They all enrage poor Balak because the curses he bought are falling on himself. The final oracle envisions Israel's future leader. Balaam says, "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near — a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel" (Numbers 24:17).

That star foreshadows the star in the Epiphany

story. Why? Because Numbers tells about a king who hires a prophet to help kill Moses leading the people into the promised land. Matthew tells about a king who hires magi to target the new Moses leading his people into the new promised land.

So, the star which Balaam foresaw reappears to proclaim that the future leader of Israel will be Jesus.

When they present the baptism of Jesus, all four Gospels mention another symbol of the season, the dove. Obviously, the dove is important. Unfortunately, we're not exactly sure what it means.

Not just the dove, but the whole idea of the baptism usually disturbs believers (Mark 1:7-11). If John baptizes for forgiveness of sins, what is the sinless Jesus doing there? The evangelists apparently saw the same problem, and they downplay the event. Still, they use the scene to tell us something wonderful about Jesus. That's where the dove comes in.

The simplest interpretation of the dove is what all the Gospels tell us. The dove is the Spirit. But no one had described the Spirit as a dove before. Why here?

ONE POSSIBILITY comes from Genesis (1:2), which says the Spirit of God hovered over waters at creation. The Gospels may be proclaiming a new creation over Jordan's waters.

Another possibility is that the dove recalls an Old Testament image for Israel. The psalms speak of Israel as a dove (55:6, 68:13, 74:19) — swift, beautiful, and vulnerable. In Hosea (7:11; 11:11) doves symbolize God's senseless and trembling people. So, having the Spirit appear as a dove may designate those for whom Jesus will exercise his ministry.

Doves appear in other places: Noah sends one from the ark to search for land (Genesis 8:8), and merchants sell them in the temple for the purification of new mothers who cannot afford sheep (Lev 12:8; Mark 11:15; John 2:14; Luke 2:4). But those images seem less likely to apply.

The Holy Spirit appears as a dove in our depictions of the Trinity because of the baptism of Jesus. Whether it proclaims a new creation of the recipients of Jesus' care, the dove announces the reign of God. The heavens which bore the miraculous star rend apart to reveal the Spirit. In these symbols we acclaim Jesus as the Christ.

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Fr. Paul Turner



the
Good News
God's word in
everyday living

Daily Scripture Readings

Christmas

Wednesday, December 25

Isaiah 52:7-10

Psalms 98:1-6

Hebrews 1:1-6

John 1:1-18

Thursday, December 26

Acts 4:8-10; 7:54-59

Psalms 31:3-4, 6-8, 17-21

Matthew 10:17-22

Friday, December 27

1 John 2:1-4

Psalms 97:1-2, 5-6, 11-12

John 20:2-8

Saturday, December 28

1 John 1:5-2:2

Psalms 124:2-5, 7-8

Matthew 2:13-18

Holy Family

Sunday, December 29

Strach 3:2-6, 12-14

Psalms 128:1-5

Colossians 3:12-17

Luke 2:22-40

Monday, December 30

1 John 2:12-17

Psalms 96:7-10

Luke 2:36-40

Tuesday, December 31

1 John 2:18-21

Psalms 96:1-2, 7-11, 13

John 1:1-18

Wednesday, January 1

Numbers 6:22-27

Psalms 67:2-3, 5-6, 8

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:16-21

Thursday, January 2

1 John 2:22-28

Psalms 98:1-4

John 1:19-28

Friday, January 3

1 John 2:29-3:6

Psalms 98:1-3, 6

John 1:29-34

Saturday, January 4

1 John 3:7-10

Psalms 98:1, 7-9

John 1:35-42

Epiphany of the Lord

Sunday, January 5

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalms 72:1-2, 7-8,

10-13

Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6

Matthew 2:1-12

Monday, January 6

1 John 3:22-4:6

Psalms 2:7-8, 10-11

Matthew 4:12-17, 23-25

Tuesday, January 7

1 John 4:7-10

Psalms 72:1-4, 7-8

Mark 6:34-44

Wednesday, January 8

1 John 4:11-18

Psalms 72:1-2, 10, 12-13

Mark 6:45-52

Thursday, January 9

1 John 4:19-5:4

Psalms 72:1-2, 14-15,

17

Luke 4:14-22a

Friday, January 10

1 John 5:5-13

Psalms 147:12-15,

19-20

Luke 5:12-16

Saturday, January 11

1 John 5:14-21

Psalms 149:1-4, 9

John 3:22-30

Baptism of the Lord

Sunday, January 12

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7

Psalms 29:1-4, 9-10

Acts 10:34-38

Mark 1:7-11