

DISCOVERING JOY

by Rev. Elizabeth A. Foster

Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 3, Verses 13-17

“...Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven, saying ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’”

When the heavens open, it is a veritable baptism of new life in the Spirit. Unfortunately, most of do not recognize that this is heaven now and right here. In a painting found in a European hospital John the Baptist is pointing to Jesus on the cross. The painting is part of an old triptych that was available to hospital patients and opened up once a year to allow the patients to experience an opening up of the true message to them: that Jesus accompanied them in their suffering, even into death, and beyond to rebirth. He and they can feel joy they will never be alone or turned away from. This painting, the Passion Story, Easter, and the biblical account all point to an opening beyond the mundane to an eternal life, with joy. But we are left with the doves to find our own baptisms into spirit.

Each type of bird points to the great dove in the biblical text and affirms joy for us. There is a stained glass window in here, up and to your right. The bird is an archetype, available to past and present to bring forth what is beyond concrete knowing. Here it is essential to understand meaning. I often attribute a meaning to the peacock like the spiritual status of the dove. Meaning is often personal as well as that which is held by a group. I remember having a dream many years ago, coming out of underground tunnels high on a mountain, and carried as I hung on, by a noiseless bird which I could not look up and see. I could hear the air swishing by and feel the straining ache of the hold. And I went from feeling cold air to warm sunlight and stillness as I was brought down by the great bird to a valley of love and earthly delight.

All of life, including oneself, and all around one, is a part of the whole Spirit. Most of the time, the Spirit is not seen – but it is there. When I was much younger, the meaning of Christ was that I was never alone, even in death. During Passion Week, Christ would be vilified, beaten, and tortured to death. And then he would come from the tomb to new life with his father in heaven. To someone young and in need it was calming to feel so close and know none of us would be turned away. It was such a powerful bond of weakness and power. There is a growing sense of that power as an adult. There is no personal God, but there is still God and the meaning given to the life and death, and new life bestowed on Jesus. It is all pointing to God, and the faith in his father which Jesus showed in a body-racked by pain in his death. The joy of Easter is the recognition that God is all of life and points like John the Baptist did, to all. There is a baptism when you feel everything opened up and Spirit is everywhere. The sacred is everywhere, even in what seems so awful. It is a part of the whole.

The songbirds at my feeder are smaller versions, but I see the big bird in the small birds that swoop down to the feeder. I see that they carry the big bird in the way they are formed, in

their activity, and in their actions. They are what gives me a sense of concreteness that the bird exists, that the bird lives.

I try to attract the birds at my bird feeder with particular seeds, in order to get a variety and lots of activity and they always come. Once in awhile I see an unusual bird at the feeder or nearby on the ground. Recently, I saw a couple of big black birds with blue head feathers. They reminded me also of the big bird because they are so unusual to see. But awesome! That is probably the most riveting aspect about birds: their awesomeness in nature and they show everything is related.

Meanwhile, it is up to each of us to find our lives, and those who depend on us, as meaningful. Last week, at the risk of watching a hokey movie according to my son Rob, I saw Narnia Chronicles, originally written by the Christian author T.S. Lewis. A significant moment of love for the other and oneself occurred. It was truly nonviolent and loving. I would like to be more that way. A teenaged boy with his younger siblings is crossing a fast-melting iced lake. All of a sudden, the group was threatened by menacing wolves who meant them harm. The boy held a powerful sword, which surly looked like a cross. Instead of killing the threatening wolves, as I would have done, the young teen thrust his sword into the ice floe as it broke off a moment later. All lives were saved.

Easter has, for me, the joy of not being alone, not being looked away from, faith in the sacredness of all life, and nonviolence, as I grow on the edge of life.