

O God, Your grace transforms the world, and that is marvelous in our eyes! Ps 118:23
Teach us to make Your grace known, that it may be a fountain of life for all who
yearn for You. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be
always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Can you remember when you perceived something miraculous happening right before your eyes? Maybe you saw something that utterly transformed a situation you thought was hopeless. Maybe you watched illness turn into a kind of healing, physically or emotionally, that amazed you. Maybe you've been astonished to see God open a new vista on the future or direct you to a pathway you hadn't considered— something that has brought you joy beyond the telling!

If you have not seen something miraculous unfold in front of you, no worries—just open your Bible. Scripture positively brims with stories of the miraculous: individuals and groups perceiving astonishing manifestations of the Holy.

- Moses sees flames of holy fire—a burning bush alight with the power of God! From those flames, he hears God telling him to lead the Israelites out of enslavement in Egypt. ^{Exod 3}
- The Israelites are trapped at the Red Sea, full of dread as Egyptian soldiers advance, when they see something impossible: the Red Sea divides into two towering walls of water, leaving dry land across which the Israelites flee to safety! ^{Exod 14:21–31}

- The Israelites are astounded to see Mount Sinai wreathed in smoke and flashes of lightning. ^{Exod 19:16–19} They hear the blast of a heavenly trumpet, louder and louder, as God speaks to Moses in thunder!¹
- The prophet Elijah experiences a wind so strong it splits mountains, then earthquake and fire, and then an absorbing sound of sheer silence in which God speaks to him. ^{1 Kgs 19} Later, his disciple Elisha watches as a flaming chariot with fiery steeds takes Elijah in a whirlwind up to heaven. ^{2 Kgs 2:11}
- In The Acts of the Apostles, a deacon named Stephen, “full of grace and power,” has performed “great wonders and signs among the people.” ^{Acts 6:8} Stephen sees the heavens open to reveal “the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.” ^{7:55–56}
- A Pharisee named Saul, relentless persecutor of Christians, ^{8:1–3} has a vision on the road to Damascus: a flash of blinding light knocks him to the ground, and he and his companions hear the voice of Jesus—a miracle that will change the course of Christian history and theology. ^{9:1–9}

Miracle upon miracle upon miracle! Individuals and communities throughout history have been liberated and healed, commissioned and strengthened by the God whose power can do infinitely more than we could ever ask or imagine! ^{Eph 3:20}

Now, I know some folks balk at the idea of miracles. That’s fine. The capacity to reason and dissent is a gift from our Creator. Skepticism can be well founded; debates about miracles and mystical experiences can hone our wisdom and deepen

our faith. For myself, I do believe God performs wondrous works of transformation, healing, and empowerment every single day, whether we notice or fail to notice, whether we understand the significance of what's happening or not.

Some of you in this sanctuary may have heard the divine voice, comforting you or urging you toward something new. You may have seen flames of holy fire or felt yourself to be wrapped in infinite love. I have a friend who shared her experience of being enfolded in God's love—it happened when she was a little girl, and it changed her life. Indeed, such experiences are marvelous and can sustain us for a lifetime! But if those are not your experiences, let me suggest that nevertheless, you have experienced God's wondrous works. How do I know? Well, if you've been baptized, or if you've ever seen a baptism, you've glimpsed God's mighty power at work—far beyond what we can imagine!

Today the Western Christian Church celebrates the Baptism of our Lord. Baptism has been core to Christian identity and mission as early as the Gospel of Matthew, written about 75 A.D., within living memory of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. In Matthew 28, the risen Christ commands his followers to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” ^{Matt 28:19} Since those earliest days, the baptism of Jesus has been taken as a sign that the power of the Holy Spirit renews and strengthens not only Jesus but all who are baptized.²

Today the Gospel of Luke leads us deep into the mystery of baptism: we witness the Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove. All four Gospels preserve the story, but each presents the baptism of Jesus in his own way. Mark has just “the Spirit” descending on Jesus as he comes up out of the water. ^{Mark 1:10} Matthew clarifies that it’s “the Spirit of God” that descends. ^{Matt 3:16} The Gospel of John has John the Baptist testify to having seen the Spirit descend and remain with Jesus—that “remaining” is a big deal in the Fourth Gospel. ^{John 1:32} And in our lesson this morning, Luke gives us a fascinating fuller description. Luke says the Holy Spirit in bodily form like a dove descends on Jesus after he has been baptized and is praying. That’s really specific—it’s only in Luke—and it’s vitally important for Luke’s Gospel and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles (also written by Luke).

So: the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are designed as a two-part history of the Holy Spirit working through Jesus and the apostles. The Holy Spirit makes everything possible in Luke and Acts!³ Among those filled with the Holy Spirit are: Mary the mother of Jesus; Elizabeth, her husband Zechariah, and their son John the Baptist; a man named Simeon who testifies to Jesus; then Jesus, who receives the Holy Spirit at his baptism and is filled with the power of the Spirit from then on. ^{Luke 4:1, 14, 18; 10:21; Acts 1:2 &c.} In the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit falls on the disciples at Pentecost and many times thereafter, when they testify to the salvation they know in Jesus Christ. The good news of salvation sweeps across the region, the Holy Spirit energizing the church’s proclamation throughout Judea, Galilee, and

Samaria, ^{Acts 9:31} then falling upon Gentiles ^{10:44} and sustaining Paul in his years of itinerant preaching ministry. ^{Acts 13:2 and *passim*}

Luke could not be clearer: Through baptism and prayer, the Holy Spirit works visibly in the real world to spread the grace of God! The prophetic and healing power of Holy Spirit is at work, not only in Jesus but in all prayerful believers.⁴ Luke gives us incarnational theology at its most daring! With the Holy Spirit in bodily form descending on Jesus as he prays, Luke is inviting us to see just how real, how embodied and visible, the work of the Holy Spirit is, in the lives of individuals and communities, especially when they pray.

Are you ready for that idea?

Whether you've seen it or not noticed, the Holy Spirit has been with you in real life, renewing and strengthening you for the work of grace—from the moment you were baptized up to this moment right now, especially when you open your heart to God in prayer. ^{Luke 12:11–12; Acts 1:8; 2:38–39}

We've been baptized into the love of God who emancipates every captive!

We've been baptized into the power of God who heals and transforms

everything that exists!

And the Holy Spirit is with us, energizing and superintending that work of grace.

Through the Christian initiation of baptism, we are drawn into the life of the Church, with its rich traditions of biblical interpretation and theology, its soaring liturgies and deep spiritual practices, its breathtaking art and gorgeous music. Excellent. But Luke is saying more than that. Through baptism and prayer, Luke says, believers are energized by the Holy Spirit

to remake history through the grace of God,
empowered by the Mighty One—as Mary sings—
whose mercy is invincible!

Following Jesus into the waters of baptism and into continual prayer,

praying without ceasing ^{1 Thess 5:17}—

we emerge renewed and strengthened for the daring work of incarnational love that is remaking history through the power of the Holy Spirit!

If you're daunted by political developments in this country and abroad,

or anxious about the intensifying effects of climate change,

or overwhelmed by the persistence of war and injustice,

just remember:

all we have to do is give ourselves to the work of grace,

following Jesus, praying without ceasing, doing all we can to heal, sustain, and

nurture this world—because the Holy Spirit is with us.

May we give ourselves to that work always,

for the sake of the One who makes all things new:

Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor, glory, and power, now and forever. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Carolyn J. Sharp

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Epiphany 1C

Isaiah 43:1–7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14–17; Luke 3:15–17, 21–22

Preached at St. Thomas’s Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut

¹ Isaac W. Oliver observes that “parallels between Luke’s Pentecost scene and Sinai abound.... Luke depicts the pneumaphany as an aural and visual event in which fiery tongues spoke. These tongues, in other words, could be heard *and* seen,” which Oliver ties, via the translation of Exod 20:18 in Targum Onkelos and remarks from Philo of Alexandria, to the divine revelation at Mount Sinai. “According to the Septuagint, the revelation at Sinai was more than just a vocal broadcast, for it claims that the Israelites “saw” (*heōra*) “the voice” (*tēn phōnēn*) and “the torches” (*tas lampadas*). At Sinai, the Israelites saw voices. Basing himself on the Septuagint, Philo claims that the divine voice proceeded like a flame from the sky transforming into words so clear that it seemed like the Israelites were actually seeing rather than hearing sound.” See Oliver, *Luke’s Jewish Eschatology: The National Restoration of Israel in Luke-Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 109.

² Speaking of the event of Jesus’s baptism by John, Michael G. Witczak notes the importance of Acts 10:38 (Peter’s review, speaking to those assembled with the centurion Cornelius, beginning with “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power”) and John 19:34 (blood and water streaming from the side of the crucified Christ) for “early writers of the Church who see this event as the inauguration of the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist (water and blood) and therefore the birth of the Church (in baptism and Eucharist).” See Witczak, *The Sacrament of Baptism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 121.

³ Many scholars have observed the important role of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts. Accessible treatments include: Darrell L. Bock, “The Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts: Power and Enablement for the Promise and Witness of the New Era,” pp. 211–226 in *A Theology of Luke and Acts: God’s Promised Program, Realized for All Nations* (); Luke Timothy Johnson, “The Prophetic Spirit,” pp. 52–71 in *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church: The Challenge of Luke-Acts to Contemporary Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

⁴ Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III note of Luke 3:22, “The reference to prayer is Lukan.... Luke’s Gospel will continue to stress Jesus at prayer (5.16; 6.12; 9.18; 11.1; 22.32), both to show Jesus’ communication with his Father and to model the need for prayer to his disciples.” See Levine and Witherington, *The Gospel of Luke*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 91.