

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



**“Water and the Spirit”
A sermon by Martha Moore-Keish**

**First Sunday in Lent
February 26, 2012
Gen. 9:8–17; Mark 1:9–15**

As I was looking back in preparation for being with you today, I realized that the last time I was here, two years ago, it was the third Sunday in Lent. I preached on baptism and repentance. During Lent. You are going to think that I only know how to preach about one thing.

Today’s gospel reading brings us to the story of Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness, the forty days that we Christians have connected with the season of Lent. We sang about this earlier: “Lord, who throughout these forty days for us did fast and pray, teach us with thee to mourn our sins and close by thee to stay.” Though Lent was initially a period of preparation for baptism, it later became a time when folks fasted and prayed in preparation for coming back into full communion with the church. Gradually it became more penitential, and as it did so, Lent became connected with Jesus’ forty days of temptation, of spiritual struggle before the beginning of his public ministry.

But this “forty days” for Jesus was not a scheduled regime of spiritual disciplines, a time he set aside as a period of cleansing before he started his ministry. This was not a planned retreat. At least in Mark’s telling, it was a stark, startling interruption of the Spirit.

But let's back up. Before he goes to meet Satan in the wilderness, Jesus glimpses the Spirit already at his baptism. Here's the first time Jesus enters the scene in the gospel: responding to the call of crazy John the Baptizer. From the nowhere town of Nazareth in Galilee, he shows up at the river Jordan and is baptized by John. And then, "just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him."

The dove here brings us back to the flood story in Genesis. There, as you may recall, the dove brought back the olive branch to Noah after the floodwaters had subsided. It was a sign of new life after devastation. Out of watery chaos, new creation. So too here: the dove descending on Jesus at his baptism signifies a new creation in Jesus Christ, God doing a new thing in the world. Do you not see it?

We often picture the Spirit as a dove, and it sounds lovely. The gentle white bird, safely hovering over Jesus, a sweet bird of peace. In fact, if you do a Google search of Holy Spirit images, most of what turns up is . . . pictures of doves. Doves floating gently out of a sunlit sky, or carrying branches of peace, or perched tamely on the shoulder of Jesus.

But the Spirit here is not so safe. We get a glimpse of that already when Mark says that "he saw the heavens torn apart"—not peacefully opened up with accompanying hymns and choirs of chubby angels like a Raphael painting. Torn apart. And the Spirit "descends." My colleague Beth Johnson, who teaches New Testament at Columbia, says that the Spirit "dive bombed" Jesus here. The new creation, we can already see, is not going to be some easy transformation of the old world into the new. There is real conflict, real struggle. And the Spirit does not take us away from that struggle, but right into the midst of it.

So the Spirit descends (or dive-bombs) like a dove at baptism, accompanied by a voice from heaven declaring, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." What happens next? "The Spirit *immediately* drove him out into the wilderness." So much for the sweet, sweet Spirit coming to rest like a dove on Jesus' shoulder. This is a fierce Spirit, driving Jesus like a demon into a place of danger, of the devil, of wild beasts.

The Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness, into the wasteland where he is tempted by the devil. Here, in the wilderness, Jesus faces the embodiment of evil, the forces that work against God's will in the world. We don't get any details of that encounter in this gospel, no explicit challenges in which Satan asks Jesus to turn stones into bread or to cast himself down from the pinnacle of the temple, as we do in other gospels. Just the stark encounter, the squaring off in the desert between beloved Son and the Evil One. And the Spirit drives him right into the midst of that conflict.

The Spirit continues to drive Jesus throughout his ministry, as he casts out demons, and confronts challenges from religious and political authorities, as well as his own disciples. The Spirit drives him on, not so much like a gentle dove as like a force of nature. Eventually, the Spirit drives him all the way to the breaking point, to the cross itself. But there is a strange logic at work here. For through the conflict the Spirit brings in the new creation, the "kingdom of God." Through death itself, the Spirit brings life.

One of the books in C.S. Lewis's Narnia series is called *The Horse and his Boy*. Some of you will remember the story: the main character is a boy named Shasta, who grows up in the country of the Calormenes (who are the enemies of Narnia, portrayed as a proud, cruel people). Shasta mercifully escapes one day from the man who is raising him, who turns out not to be his true father. With the help of a talking horse named Bree, Shasta runs away, toward the strange country of Narnia. At one point, he and Bree are chased by a fearsome lion, who drives them into the path of another traveler, a girl named Aravis, and her horse Hwin. The two children and their horses become friends, relieved to have escaped from the lion. Later, Shasta is by himself waiting for the others by some tombs on the edge of a vast desert. Cold and alone, and increasingly worried about what has happened to his friends, Shasta's blood runs cold when he begins to hear some distant growls and yelps of animals in the desert. The cries grow closer. They sound like jackals. Shasta is sure that they are heading in his direction. And then—even worse—an enormous roar echoes through the tombs, and Shasta glimpses another lion, huge and shaggy, silhouetted against the dark sky. He is sure this is

the end. The other animals, the jackals out in the desert, fall silent, and turn away. But the lion remains. Shasta closes his eyes, waiting for the lion to attack. To his surprise, it does not. But the fear stays with him.

At the end of the story, Shasta has crossed the desert, and remarkably, discovers the father that he never knew he had. But for the details, you will need to read the book. Near the end, he comes face to face with another lion—or rather, the same lion, now revealed as the great and powerful Aslan of Narnia. And Aslan reminds him of those other lions: the one who frightened him into league with Aravis, the one who frightened away the desert beasts, and others who turn Shasta's course in important ways throughout the story. "I was the lion," says Aslan. And Shasta is no longer afraid. But, as Lewis says, "a new and different sort of trembling came over him. Yet he felt glad too."

The roaring lion is not safe. But it drives Shasta where he needs to go, guiding his steps in unexpected ways until he finally reaches the home he never knew.

The lion drives Shasta as the Spirit drives Jesus: fierce and implacable, into the face of conflict—and through and beyond it.

The Spirit descending at baptism, the Spirit driving Jesus into the desert: this is the Spirit of life. But it is not a spirit of safety. Is safety what we seek?

Last week, in one of my classes, a student shared her experience of visiting a new church. One of the class requirements is for each student to participate in a worship service in a tradition not her own, and then to report on the experience to the rest of the class, as we explore what different Christians mean by "church". This student, a fair-skinned young Presbyterian woman from Raleigh, had visited a large Baptist church, predominantly African American. Before she went, one of her classmates joked, "Watch out! You might get the Spirit!" But even more striking was the reaction she reported from her family afterward. When she told her parents where she had been, they asked, "Was it okay? Were you safe?"

Now, I understand parental concern. Maybe I would have asked the same thing, if one of my daughters had been to an unfamiliar part of town, and had

walked alone into a worship service where she did not know the music or the worship style or the people. But is safety really what we are looking for in worship? Because that does not seem to be a specialty of the Spirit. Conflict, yes. And life. Not safety.

The waters of baptism, both Jesus' and ours, are not safe. The flood story teaches us that very clearly. Water brings death. But it also brings life. So also the Spirit, descending on Jesus and driving him into the desert, is not safe. But it brings life.

Where is the Spirit driving you in this season? How is the lion roaring its way into your life? We often think of Lent as a time to give something up, cleansing and preparing ourselves for the coming of Easter. But maybe this Lent we are being called not to give something up, but to open our eyes and ears for the way the Spirit may be driving us to unfamiliar and even uncomfortable places. The Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness, and on the other side, Jesus emerges proclaiming the good news. The lion drives Shasta into company, and across the bleak desert, and on the far side he discovers family and home. The Spirit does not simply sit on our shoulders as a comforting presence. It may dive-bomb its way into our lives. So next time you feel nudged, pushed, or driven into unknown territory, don't let your first question be "is it safe?" Ask instead, "Spirit of the living God, is that you?"

Martha Moore-Keish, 2012 McPherson Lecturer, is Associate Professor of Theology at the Columbia Theological Seminary. She was ordained a minister in the Presbyterian Church (PC-USA) in 2000. Her research interests include Reformed theology, liturgical theology, particularly the theology and practice of the sacraments, and feminist theology.