



January 11, 2009

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Matthew 1:4-11

“A Secret Identity & A Secret Weapon”

A great joy of my life is being a grandmother. My husband and I have had the privilege of helping to care for our older grandson since he and his father moved in with us when David was a year old. David is now seven and in first grade.

One of his joys these days is developing intricate imaginary scenarios as he plays. He often engages in conflict with various creatures. We have “wars with the zombies” and attacks on invisible villains who have arrived via meteor played out in our living room, yard, and even racing down the sledding hill at Langum Park.

A great prize in these conflicts is some kind of “secret weapon”. Many fantasies, films, and spy novels include secret weapons. It is not just children who dream of possessing one. As the Baby Boomers grow older, different face creams, body sculpting processes, and special antioxidant berries and supplements are promoted with promises of being amazing secret weapons against the aging process.

Hundreds of years ago people thought “magic” could provide them with secret weapons. The celebration of mass in the Roman Catholic Church was even seen as a kind of “magic act”. One fascinating remnant of that thinking is still with us today. During the mass, which was celebrated in Latin, the priest would lift the bread and wine during the celebration of communion. As he lifted the bread, he would say *Hoc es corpus meum* which means, “This is my body”, quoting Jesus’ words at the Last Supper. The church taught in that moment, matter became spirit.

Somehow some worshipper somewhere heard that phrase as “Hocus pocus”. It lives on today in magic shows, when the wand is waved and the magic words are uttered!

In the midst of this confusion there is a kernel of truth. Our Gospel story from Mark helps us receive it.

This is the account of Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan by John the Baptist. This event launches Jesus' into his earthly ministry.

As Jesus was baptized, he was plunged into the river. We know this, because Mark tells us something amazing happened "as he was coming up out of the water". AS he was coming up, the "heavens were torn apart" and the Spirit descended "like a dove" on Jesus.

That phrase, "like a dove", is not a common phrase in Old Testament language and thinking. The Hebrew text most often linked with this passage is Isaiah 11:1-3. There, "the spirit of the Lord shall rest on" the yearned-for descendant of Jesse, empowering the promised Messiah with "wisdom and understanding", "counsel and might".

But in today's reading from Mark, the Spirit RIPPED through the heavens. It didn't just "rest on" this humble Messiah. The Greek words suggest our text might be better stated: Jesus "saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove INTO him. The Spirit didn't just "rest on" him, but filled him and acted through him from that moment on.

Jesus had a secret weapon: the Holy Spirit of the Creator of the universe.

To make clear the significance of what had just happened, God speaks to Jesus saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Not only did Jesus have a secret weapon- he also had a secret identity: the beloved Son of God.

The ancient worshippers that saw "magic" in the mass were not far off from the truth. Because the followers of Jesus ARE provided with powers from beyond this world. In the words of Rev. Leonard Sweet, "When we receive Christian baptism we all can lay claim to the most powerful secret weapon offered to humanity: the power of God's love and grace. God's love is a transformative, transfiguring power so great that it has no comparison here on earth."

We may have missed this message, perhaps because a dove seems like such a gentle creature. Remember THIS "dove", THIS Holy Spirit, RIPPED THROUGH THE HEAVENS to reach Jesus. And JESUS, died a bloody death on the cross so that the Spirit would reach US, too.

Jesus' secret identity is revealed at his baptism: he is the beloved Son of God. He then receives the secret weapon: the Holy Spirit. We also have a secret identity as CHILDREN OF GOD. And Christ's secret weapon is ours as well: the Holy Spirit.

Friends, if this is true, why isn't the church seen as radiating power out into the world? Why is "being a Christian" so often simply equated with "being nice" in a way that seems weak, rather than powerful? Rev. Sweet suggests the problem: "Could it be because so few of us have taken this power, unleashed it and released it into our lives? [We] are content to keep our secret weapon... caged....—never letting the Spirit test its wings in our world."

The Holy Spirit is our special weapon for living. To keep this special power of God flowing into and through us, we need a daily regimen. We need to take this discipline seriously, the way a concert pianist or endurance athlete is devoted to daily practice and drills to strengthen his performance.

Consider these three steps to help "keep the wings of the Spirit beating strongly in your soul":

1. Daily alignment with God and the sacred. Sunday morning in the sanctuary isn't enough. Spirit-powered living requires us to intentionally become aware of God's presence very day. How might or DO you do this?

2. Daily self-scrutiny and reflection. Spirit-powered living brings that power to an inward focus, as well as an outward focus. We MUST assess WHAT we do, WHY we do it, with God's help EACH AND EVERY DAY. This practice will enable us to let the Spirit of Christ guide our every move. We'll gradually become more conscious of God's presence right beside us, and gradually become more willing to do what he wants us to do. How do YOU engage in self-scrutiny and reflection? When? In what ways? If you don't, where could you begin, starting today?

3. Daily embodiment. This is Spirit-powered living in action. The Spirit calls us to action. DO SOMETHING for GOD. In each and every day. ON PURPOSE. CONSCIOUSLY CHOOSING AND DOING IT because God has commanded it. Can you remember a time when you did this? What might help you remember to do this in each day? What will you do TODAY?

Every day:

1) Connect to God.

- 2) Look at yourself through God's eyes.
- 3) Do something God wants you to do.

It's a kind of UP, DOWN and OUT movement.
UP, DOWN and OUT.

Maybe you want to post those words on your bathroom mirror. UP DOWN OUT.

You could put them on your dashboard. UP DOWN OUT.

Look UP to connect with God. Look DOWN at yourself, as a CHILD appears to a parent gazing down on her. Look OUT into the world to see what God wants you to do, then do it. UP DOWN OUT.

You have a secret identity that others may not see: you are a child of God.
You have a secret power that others might not trust: the Holy Spirit of God.

But as we see the effects of the wind blowing; the world should see the **results** of our identity and power. Let's go out to serve Christ as he redeems our world. UP DOWN OUT.