

The last book in the Lord of the Rings trilogy is entitled *The Return of the King*. It's a gripping story, the entire trilogy is, and it's fascinating to see in it the story told by Scripture of Christ defeating the powers of darkness.

I suppose I'm beginning the sermon in this way because my wife and I watched *The Return of the King* over the New Year's holiday. It's fresh in my mind.

The return of our King, King Jesus, was our focus throughout Advent. And then we saw Him in a manger. We heard of His circumcision last Sunday. And today we see Him at the Jordan River being baptized by John. And after He comes up from the water, we're told that the heavens were opened to Him, and that the Father, from heaven, declared, "*This is My beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.*" And one more thing – the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove.

A dove. Just like the dove that Noah released from the window within the ark. It came back to him. And after seven days, Noah let out the dove again. In the evening it returned with a fresh olive leaf in its mouth. A very encouraging sign. After seven more days, Noah let out the dove again. And this time the dove did not return. And so, Noah saw this as the sign that it was safe for him and his family to come out.

Now that dove which Noah released, and which did not come back to him, obviously lived for a time and then, as all doves do, it died. Yet in a certain sense we can say that there is much more to this story. For when Jesus is standing in the Jordan at His baptism, we see that dove as the Holy Spirit comes to rest upon Him.

Borrowing the language from *The Lord of the Rings*, the story of the text before us today can thus be entitled, "The Return of the Dove." And because the dove returned, not to Noah but to Jesus, it is safe for you to come out.

The destruction is over. The floodwaters are no more. Everything has been made safe. This is what the dove revealed to Noah. The danger was past. Oh, there was great danger for a time. Wickedness had become great on the earth. But the waters removed that wickedness. Thus, Noah and his family were safely able to come out.

This is what Jesus' baptism means for you. It's why He entered into those waters. It's why He stood there in the Jordan. So that all wickedness, all evil, all sins, even yours and mine, would fall upon Him. In His baptism, Jesus began His journey to the cross where He would defeat all these foes, your enemies and mine, once and for all.

Jesus was not baptized for His own sake, but for your sake. So that you stand safely with Him in your baptism. There is no other safe place to stand. If you and I do not stand with Christ, we are in grave danger. If we go through the year 2023 neglecting the preaching of His Word and His Holy Sacrament on the altar, we are in grave danger. But standing with Christ, and in Christ, you are safe. See the sign of the dove. See it returning to rest upon Jesus. It is safe for you. Yet only with Jesus.

You can come out, therefore, from under your guilty conscience. The dove has returned and rests upon Jesus in His baptism. You are baptized into His death and resurrection for you. He took your guilt from you. He became the guilty one in your place. God forgives you. You are safe with Jesus.

You can come out from under the power of your sin. The dove has returned to rest upon Jesus in His baptism. You are baptized into Christ. Sin, therefore, has no power over you. You are not under God's wrath. He forgives your sins, all of them. You are under grace, for you are in Christ.

You can come out from under your fears. The fear of growing older. The fear of poor health. The fear of inflation. The fear of COVID. The fear of death. The dove has returned to rest upon Jesus. "Fear not," are His words to you. Nothing can separate you from His love. You are safe with Jesus now and always.

Wherever you have been hiding in life, you can come out, for the dove has returned. When Noah and his family came out, they offered to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving. This is also our privilege. Because you are safe with Jesus, you can go out into the world showing your thankfulness to God by how you live. Jesus has brought us out from under all our foes. Why wouldn't we want to show our thanks to Him?

The dove who returned to rest upon Jesus in His baptism also rests upon you. The Holy Spirit will lead you in life. He will lead you through every day in the year ahead of you. He will lead you through trial and through sorrow. And because He returned to rest upon Jesus, He will always lead you to Christ Jesus so that you remain safe with Him forever. Amen.