

## **“The Spirit Has Landed”**

### **Matthew 3:13-17**

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February 1, 2004

I like the names, “Spirit” and “Opportunity.” They are most appropriate. These are the names of the two golf carts or six-wheeled rovers that have landed on Mars and are sending pictures back to earth. I stand in awe of the fact that pictures that traveled forty million miles look better than the ones I usually take from a whopping distance of six feet.

On Sunday, January 4, the day that “Spirit” landed on Mars, one broadcaster caught my attention when she announced, “The Spirit has landed.” At first, I had no idea what she was referring to but felt assured this was going to be a religious story. “Perhaps we are going to see a picture of God,” I thought. Then I remembered there is an Old Testament passage that says no one can look upon the face of God and live. I suspect that means that cameras would malfunction, too.

While the lady reading the news went on to tell us about the Martian rover, my mind wandered to the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ baptism. “The Spirit has landed.” That’s exactly what happened to Jesus when he was baptized. God’s Spirit descended upon him and either whispered something beautiful in his ear or declared it openly for all to hear. I’ll let Matthew tell you about it.

*“Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you and do you come to me?’ Jesus replied, ‘Let it be so now. It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then John consented.”*

*“As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son whom I love. With him I am well pleased’” Matthew 3:13-17.*

“The Spirit has landed.” I wonder if anyone uttered those words when they gathered by the river to watch Jesus’ baptism? I doubt it because they didn’t have CNN or Fox News carrying the story. How deprived they were and didn’t even know it.

Today, let’s shift the focus of the Spirit’s landing on Mars to the Spirit’s landing upon Jesus in the Jordan River. I don’t have any pictures to show you but I do have a great story to tell.

Even though they share different details of the baptism of Jesus, all three Synoptic writers include it. Mark asserts John the Baptist’s inferiority, Matthew has John strongly resisting Jesus’ request and having to be convinced this is appropriate and Luke doesn’t even mention John. However, the thread that runs through all three accounts of Jesus’ baptism is the descent of the Spirit of God upon Jesus and the words of affirmation, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.”

Why was there such a strong emphasis upon the Holy Spirit at Jesus’ baptism? Why was it necessary for the Spirit to manifest itself in such a dramatic and unmistakable way? Of what significance is this to us? I can think of a couple of reasons and lessons.

**I think the Spirit came at Jesus’ baptism to give him a clear sense of identity and purpose.** The words from heaven, “This is my beloved Son whom I love; with him I am well pleased” had to remind Jesus of two Messianic passages from the Old Testament. The first was Psalm 2:7, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.” The second was Isaiah 42:1, “Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight. I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.”

Jesus’ baptism affirmed the fact that he belonged to God as much as Mary and Joseph, if not more so, and his purpose for living was to establish justice and righteousness throughout the land.

This had to be reassuring yet frightening. For years, Jesus had been toiling in Joseph's carpenter's shop doing more than building table and chairs. I think he was also searching for his identity and clarifying his purpose. No doubt countless hours had been spent studying the prophets and praying to his heavenly Father. I am sure he had numerous conversations with Mary and Joseph about the unusual circumstances surrounding his birth. That experience in the temple at age twelve had to have a profound effect upon him. Who was he and why was he here? What did the world need from him? What did God want of him?

These questions are not unique to Jesus, are they? Is there one among us today that has not grappled with them? How liberating it is to answer them with clarity and certainty. How frustrating it is when the answers don't come.

Jesus' baptism and the "landing of the Spirit" had to resolve any lingering doubts he may have had. He knew then, if not before, beyond any shadow of doubt who he was and why he was here. He was God's Son and he was here to do His work.

Dr. Peter Gomes is the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Pusey Minister in the Memorial Chapel at Harvard. I appreciate his words about the meaning of Jesus' baptism, "Jesus is baptized not to repent of sins, for he is without sin, but to establish and give witness to a relationship that shows he belongs to God and is called to do God's work in the world. He is baptized as a witness to God's claim upon him."

This morning, you may be grappling with issues of identity and purpose. While I know you want specifics, perhaps the place to begin is by declaring what Jesus did at his baptism, "I belong to God and I am called to do His work." That's a good starting point on your journey of self-awareness and purpose.

**I also think the Spirit came to give Jesus a clear sense of direction and power.** It is one thing to know who you are and what your mission in life is. It is another to know where to go and what to do. Timing is everything. How many of us have done the right thing at the wrong time and regretted it? With opportunities come decisions that call for wisdom and guidance. People facing opportunities need the steady hand of the Spirit of God guiding them.

Do you know how these two Martian rovers got their names? A few years ago a young girl by the name of Sofi was born in Siberia, a bitterly cold and isolated area of Russia. Sofi was an orphan that was adopted at the age of two by a single mother in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Sofi is now a third grader and doing well. She entered an essay contest last year and out of 10,000 applicants, she won! She won a trip to the Kennedy Space Center in Florida to watch the lift-off of the Mars Rover.

While there, she was asked to read an excerpt from her winning essay. She read, "I use to live in an orphanage. It was dark and cold and lonely. At night, I looked up in the sparkly sky and felt better. I dreamed I could fly there. In America, I can make all my dreams come true. Thank you for giving me the 'Spirit' and 'Opportunity'."

By now you have figured out that the contest Sofi entered was to name these two Martian rovers. Could two more appropriate names have been selected? I don't think so.

In some ways, opportunity and spirit will be forever linked in our minds and this could not be more appropriate, either. With every opportunity to impact the world we need the Spirit's guidance. Jesus certainly did as revealed in this scripture.

Was it time for Jesus to leave the security of home and family and begin his historic mission? Was John the Baptist preparing the way for him? How would he organize and accomplish this enormous task? Who would help him? How would he handle the resistance that was sure to come?

Surely you know what it is like to feel intimidated and overwhelmed by a challenge. If so, you can understand how relieved and excited Jesus must have been to sense the nearness of God's Spirit and hear those affirming words telling him that he was making the right decision and would not be alone. The God of creation that loved the world with all His heart would be with

him, leading, guiding and empowering. This opportunity, as grand as it was, had the blessing of the Father. How important this was to Jesus.

It is important to us, too. All of us need a clear sense of identity, purpose, direction and power. Our opportunities to make the world better need to be blessed by the Father and led by the Spirit. This is why I encourage you to join me in studying His word and seeking His will through fervent prayer and the counsel of Godly people. For you see, I believe what God did for Jesus He wants to do for us, too.

“The Spirit has landed.” I hope this means more to you than a Martian expedition. A lot more!