

The Eagle vs. The Dove Matthew 3:13-17

Four Seasons Landscaping.

Three words. That's all I've got to say, and you know ***exactly*** what I'm talking about. You know exactly which public relations fiasco I'm referring to.

November 7, 2020. The "episode" began when President Donald Trump tweeted that a "Big press conference" would take place at the **Four Seasons in Philadelphia**. He was later forced to clarify that it would be at ... wait for it ... **Four Seasons Total Landscaping**.

Now, you don't have to have been a marketing major in college or a seasoned campaign operative to know that if you're trying to make the case that you deserve people's trust to govern responsibly for another four years, you don't hold the press conference at a landscaping store wedged in between **Fantasy**

Island Adult Books and the **Delaware Valley Cremation Center**.

Late-night comics dined for weeks on that toothsome morsel—a sweaty Rudy Giuliani as the lead pitchman for an incompetent political operation that was trying to convince the country that it hadn't just lost a presidential election by historic margins.

But, I mean, Rudy and the whole **gang-who-couldn't-shoot-straight** had some competition in Jesus' **own** political soft-launch at the Jordan River.

That's right, I said, "Political soft-launch." I know that talking about politics in church makes some people break out in hives. "Jesus was religious, not political," they say.

But, and again ... hear me out. Even though it's a baptism, Jesus has got one foot in the baptistery and one foot in roiling political

waters. The problem for us modern folks, 2,000 years removed, is that we think those are different pools of water.

And if you're thinking about the separation of church and state, that's a pretty good impulse in the world we're in right now, but it's about 1,700 years too late for Jesus. Until 1789, when the Constitution made its first appearance on the scene, there **was** no such thing as "separation of church and state." But more about that in a minute.

Even if Jesus was just soft-launching his new Palestinian Religious Broadcast Network, he went about it in the wrong way. He should have made his way down to Jerusalem, or at least sought out Jerusalem's envoys, to reassure the religious bigwigs he was on the kosher side of any potential religious disputes that might pop up.

It would have benefitted him if he'd made the trip to Jerusalem to make sure everybody knew where he stood, that he was on the

same page as the keepers of the keys. He ***should*** have gone to the Temple.

Instead, he decided to have his coming-out party at that muddy little nothing of a river in the middle of nowhere—the Jordan River.

And does he present himself there to a proper priest or religious kingpin?

He does not.

Instead, he seeks out a wild-eyed, megaphone-toting, bug-eating lunatic, whose sartorial choices, let's just be honest, are never going to land him that spread in GQ. John the Baptist.

When Jesus steps down into the muddy Jordan, he isn't having a quiet little moment with God out in nature. He's walking straight into Israel's old stories, the ones everybody on that riverbank

would've grown up on. That water is crowded with memory. To stand in the Jordan is to remember the Red Sea, that terrifying and beautiful night when God cut a path right through the chaos and led a bunch of runaway enslaved people out of the grip of empire and into the scary possibility of freedom.

So when Jesus chooses **this** water, the Jordan, he's **signaling** something. A New Exodus is kicking off. He's standing there as "New Israel," the Beloved Son who will walk the path the nation couldn't quite seem to stay on.

But see, he's not being baptized because he's "bad." He's being baptized because he's one of **us**, shoulder to shoulder with every person who's ever stared at a wall of water or a stretch of desert and thought, "I don't see a way through this. I don't know if God can get me from here to there."

And the Jordan isn't just about leaving **Egypt** behind. It's about finally stepping into what God promised. Jesus shares his name

with Joshua, Yeshua, the one who first led those formerly enslaved people across this very river into the promised land to claim an inheritance they never thought they'd live to see.

With Jesus, the heavens rip open, the Spirit comes down like a dove, and you get this picture of a **New** Joshua getting ready to lead us, not into a patch of real estate, but into a new way of being human.

But here's where it gets really interesting.

When the heavens are torn open, and that voice booms out, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased," it sounds like a nice religious moment. A divine pat on the back. God affirms Jesus before he heads off to do ministry stuff.

But if you're standing on that riverbank in the first century, you hear something **else** entirely. You hear a direct challenge to the most powerful man in the world.

So, now we return to the absence of the concept of the separation of church and state in Jesus' little slice of heaven in first-century Palestine.

See, Caesar Augustus had a title. He was called ***divi filius***, "Son of God." And it wasn't just a title. It was inscribed on coins, carved into monuments, and announced in proclamations across the empire. Augustus was the son of the divine Julius Caesar, and therefore, he ***himself*** was divine. His successors inherited the title.

The emperor was the Son of God, the bringer of peace, the savior of the world.

So, remember, that wasn't Christian language to start with. That was Roman propaganda.

Consequently, when a voice from heaven declares over this Galilean tradesman standing in a muddy river, "This is my Son, the Beloved," it's not just theology. Turns out, it's treason.

New Testament scholar Warren Carter has spent his career helping us see what we miss when we strip the politics out of the Gospels. He points out that Matthew's entire story is a running conflict with the empire.

And this moment at the Jordan?

It's the opening shot by the newly grown up Jesus.

When Jesus tells John, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness," when he says that, it sounds like a head-scratcher. What does that even ***mean***?

But Carter argues that "righteousness" in Matthew isn't just about being a good person. It's about **covenant faithfulness**. It's about Israel finally being who God called them to be.

And here's the kicker: that faithfulness Jesus was fulfilling, the one commanded of us, necessarily puts us in conflict with the empire. Because the empire demands our ultimate allegiance. Empire wants to be our god.

But covenant faithfulness says, "No. There's only one God, and Caesar isn't it."

So when Jesus steps into that water to "fulfill all righteousness," he's not just getting baptized. He's making a public declaration of allegiance. He's saying, "I'm signing up for God's program for **Israel**, not Rome's program for the **world**."

Now, here's something I find fascinating.

When the Spirit descends on Jesus, Matthew says it comes down
"like a dove."

A dove.

Not an eagle.

You might think, "Well, what else **would** it be?" But think about it. If you wanted to signal power, divine favor, the blessing of heaven on a new king, the eagle would be the obvious choice.

In fact, the eagle was **Rome's** symbol. Roman legions marched behind eagle standards. When a new emperor took power, Roman writers described eagles appearing as omens of divine favor. The eagle meant strength, military might, the power to crush your enemies.

Scholar Michael Peppard has shown that Roman audiences would have immediately understood the symbolism. An eagle

descending on someone meant the gods were crowning a new emperor.

But what descends on **Jesus**?

That's right: a dove.

The Spirit comes in the form of the most vulnerable, gentle, non-threatening bird you can imagine. The new world God's launching isn't going to be established the way **Rome** establishes its peace, through legions and crosses and crucified dissidents along the roadways.

It'll be established through vulnerability. Through self-giving love. Through a sovereign who washes feet and dies on the empire's gallows.

The dove says, "This is a different kind of power."

I don't know if you've noticed, but we're living in a moment when **some** folks are working really hard to fuse religion and political power. And they're not being subtle about it.

We've got preachers declaring that certain political figures are anointed by God. We've got religious leaders promising that if their candidate wins, Christianity will be powerful again. We've got rallies that look like worship services and worship services that look like rallies.

And when I read this story of Jesus' baptism, I want to ask:

What kind of power are we signing up for?

Because there are two visions on offer here. There's the eagle, and there's the dove.

The **eagle** says power comes from domination, from forcing your enemies into submission, from being so strong that nobody can

touch you. The **eagle** says the goal is to win, to rule, to make sure your people are on top.

The **dove** says power comes from solidarity with the vulnerable and that the goal is faithfulness, not victory. The **dove** says God's reign doesn't look like Rome's reign, even when Rome puts on Christian clothes and flies the flag.

On Wednesday, Renée Good—a 37-year-old poet, mother of three, devoted Christian—dropped her six-year-old off at school in Minneapolis. Minutes later, she was shot three times by an ICE agent. A man whose father describes him as a conservative Christian. A man who flew the Gadsden, "Don't Tread on Me" flag outside his home. Good man. Good Christian.

Renée Good's wife said Renée believed "we're here to love each other, care for each other, and keep each other safe and whole."

The eagle and the dove, face to face on a snowy Minneapolis street. I think I know where Jesus was. He was sitting in the passenger seat with a six-year-old's stuffed animals spilling into his lap.

Jesus didn't start his ministry by going to the halls of power to make deals with the folks in charge. He went to a **river** where ordinary people were gathering, hungry for change but with no political clout to make it happen.

Jesus stood **with** them in the water. He got muddy with them. He submitted to the same baptism of repentance they were submitting to, even though tradition says he didn't need to repent of anything.

Why?

Because God's way **into** the world isn't from the top down. It's from the bottom up. It's from the margins in. It's Emmanuel, God

with us, and the "us" isn't the people in the skyboxes, drinking complimentary champagne. It's the people in the cheap seats, drinking over-priced beer.

Heck, it's the people who can't afford seats at **all**.

Here's what I believe we need to think about this week:

The voice from heaven says, "This is my Son, the Beloved."

Before Jesus heals anyone. **Before** he preaches a single sermon. **Before** he does anything to earn it. Before **anything**, he's named Beloved.

That's not a reward. That's an identity, a starting point.

And here's what I think that means for **us**: **We don't have to earn our place in God's heart.** We're already there. The voice that spoke over Jesus speaks over us. Beloved. Not because of

our productivity, our usefulness, or our political utility for someone's agenda. Beloved because that's who we **are**.

But here's the thing. That belovedness isn't a warm blanket to wrap ourselves in while the world burns. It's a commission. It's a launching point.

Because immediately after Jesus hears, "You are my Beloved," he gets driven into the wilderness to be tested. "If you **are** the Son of God," the tempter says, "turn these stones into bread. Throw yourself off the Temple. Bow down to me, and I'll give you all the kingdoms of the world."

In other words: Use your belovedness for **yourself**. Leverage it. Turn it into power, spectacle, domination.

But Jesus says no. Three times.

Because he knows that the belovedness God gives isn't meant to be hoarded or weaponized. It's meant to be given away. Spent. Poured out.

So here's the question:

Are we looking for the eagle, for a Christianity that wins, that dominates, that gets to call the shots?

Or are we willing to follow the dove, into solidarity with the vulnerable, into faithfulness that might look like losing, into a kind of power that doesn't make the world's kind of sense but makes **God's** kind of sense?

Jesus walked into that river and chose a side. Not Rome's side. Not even the religious **establishment's** side. He chose **God's** side, which turned out to be the side of everyone the empire had forgotten or crushed.

And a voice from heaven said, "That's my boy. That's the one.

That's what ***I'm*** doing in the world."

Two thousand years later, that voice is still speaking. Still calling beloved children to walk into the water. Still launching us into the same dangerous, beautiful, world-changing covenant faithfulness.

The only question is whether we'll follow the dove and Jesus down into the muddy water.

—Amen.