

Acts 2, Luke 3
May 19, 2024, Pentecost
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Her eyes were like two brown circles with big black dots in the center.

Her face was a perfect oval, like a circle that had its two sides gently compressed by a Thigh Master.

John and Mary had never met. They were like two hummingbirds who had also never met.

She had a deep, throaty, genuine laugh, like that sound a dog makes just before it throws up.

Her vocabulary was as bad as, like, whatever.

She grew on him like she was a colony of E. coli and he was room-temperature Canadian beef.

The lamp just sat there, like an inanimate object.

Even in his last years, Grand pappy had a mind like a steel trap, only one that had been left out so long, it had rusted shut.

The thunder was ominous-sounding, much like the sound of a thin sheet of metal being shaken backstage during the storm scene in a play.

Her lips were red and full, like tubes of blood drawn by an inattentive phlebotomist.¹

This list of similes and metaphors was brought to you by high school English teachers and was collected by Laura Christiansen and shared on her blog. We can't be sure what the original assignments were, but it must have been a creative writing assignment in which each student was required to use a certain number of similes and/or metaphors in their paper. And it seems like some of the students were desperate.

As a writer myself, I can tell you, the comparison either comes naturally or it doesn't. Every *forced* metaphor (or tortured metaphor as my high school English teacher referred to them) I've ever written or spoken has been awful. Similes and metaphors are supposed to set a scene and help a writer paint a picture for the reader. Ideally, these literary devices enable readers to see a mood or anticipate where the plot is going. This is why a laugh that sounds like the pre-cursor to dog vomit is such an

¹ <https://bloggingbistro.com/similes-and-metaphors/>, accessed, 5/17/24.

interesting choice. What is it that the writer wants the reader to see or understand? Where do you go from there?

The Bible, like a lot of literature is full of symbolism and metaphor. We've talked a lot about the literary devices biblical writers employ to make their point and how we should interpret those choices. Sometimes interpretation is difficult because we live in a different time and place than the original audience. Our experiences and our relationships to even ordinary objects or natural phenomena are different from those of our ancestors 2000 years ago. For what it's worth, it is appropriate to try to understand what the authors meant when they wrote and at the same time, to look for meaning in this time and place.

Pentecost is all about the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is almost always talked about using metaphor and symbolism because how else do you talk about Mystery? The Pentecost story is in the book of Acts where the author writes that the Holy Spirit is like two things: wind and fire.

In chapter 2:

2 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?"

¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

You probably know, but in case you don't, Acts and the Gospel of Luke were written by the same author. In Luke, in the story of Jesus' baptism, the author compares the Holy Spirit to a dove, which is obviously different from fire and wind.

He wrote:

²¹Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

This morning, I would like to think together about what the author may have been trying to say about God with these comparisons to wind, fire, and especially the dove. Certainly, the author must have wanted readers to understand that God's presence shows up in different ways. Sometimes fire rages, destroying everything in its path. That's the kind of Holy Spirit presence I want when it's time to fight for justice and dismantle oppressive systems and unjust policies. But sometimes, fire crackles and

pops in a fireplace on a cold winter night. That's the kind of Holy Spirit I want close to me at the end of a long dreary day when I haven't felt warm or safe in a while.

Wind, like fire, shows up in different ways. Sometimes the howling of the wind is impossible to ignore, picking up everything in its path, and creating chaos. That's the kind of Holy Spirit that forces us to reorder our priorities and inspires us to turn over tables that exclude our neighbors. But sometimes the wind is a light breeze that we don't even notice until we take the time to sit on the porch and listen to the windchimes or watch the dandelion fuzz blowing about.

The Holy Spirit seems to know how to show up and how to get our attention. Long before Jesus' day, the prophet Elijah went looking for God's presence on the top of Mt. Horeb. There was a great wind, but God was not in the wind. There was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. There was a fire, but God was not in the fire. And then there was a whisper...God was in a still, small voice. And God had Elijah's attention. Indeed, the Spirit of God knows how to show up.

In the story of Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit shows up like a dove. To be honest, the Holy Spirit as a dove has always been the least interesting option as far as I'm concerned. I mean...what do doves do? Glide in and perch on the window sill, looking pristine? I don't have much use for a Holy Spirit like that. Wind and fire seem more dramatic and, frankly, a lot more helpful. I do like the idea that when John baptized Jesus, *something* happened. In that moment, Jesus felt and heard something he needed from God, "You are my son, with you I am well-pleased." In this story, the Holy Spirit is a messenger of good news. That does seem dove-like.

Jesus' baptism isn't the only place in the Bible in which the presence of God is represented by a bird. Way back in Genesis 1, before God created anything, the Holy hovered (presumably like a bird) over the face of the deep. In the Talmud, ancient rabbis specify what kind of bird hovered, "The Spirit of God hovered over the surface of the waters---like a dove,"² they wrote. I don't know about you, but I think that's an odd choice. There are a lot of other birds to choose from, more formidable birds, birds that are more powerful, more regal, and more elegant. I am not a bird expert, but a flamingo comes to mind. Why didn't God hover over the deep like a flamingo?

Flamingoes are beautiful and a little bit flashy. They are large, have long legs, they can fly up to 40 mph, and they are quite social. Researchers have learned that they form loyal friendships that last for a long time³. These feel like good Holy Spirit traits. Full disclosure, in the same *Psychology Today* article in which I learned that

² Blue, Debbie, *Consider the Birds: A Provocative Guide to Birds of the Bible*, (The United Methodist Publishing House: Nashville, TN, 2013), 1.

³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-athletes-way/202004/what-can-flamingos-teach-us-about-friendship#:~:text=Flamingos%20form%20enduring%20friendships%2C%20a%20five%2Dyear%20study%20reports.&text=Flamingos%20form%20loyal%20friendships%20that,four%20flocks%20of%20captive%20flamingos>, accessed 5/15/24.

flamingoes form loyal friendships, I also learned that they hold grudges for a long time, so maybe that is not the best choice for the Holy Spirit. We don't want a bitter Holy Spirit hovering around.

But still...I have to believe there is a bird better suited than a dove to represent the presence of God.

Christian artwork has helped us imagine the Spirit of God as a white bird, however, in reality, the author would likely have imagined a gray bird with an iridescent green and violet neck. These birds were common in Palestine. They are considered the ancestor of our common domestic pigeon, the kind that gathers in our parks, sidewalk cafes, and caves; the kind that poops all over our playground equipment, windshields, and sidewalks. I will confess, the Holy Spirit as a dove became less interesting to me when I learned that doves are pigeons. Seriously? The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a pigeon? And also, a pigeon hovering and presiding over creation? Absolutely not. I think the ancient rabbis who decided the bird must have been a pigeon were the ones enjoying too much wine, not the followers of Jesus gathered at Pentecost.

Archaeological evidence suggests that pigeons were domesticated early in human history. People have raised them to be used as sacrifices in religious rituals. They've raised them to eat, race, and carry messages, too. Pigeons can carry up to 2.5 ounces on their backs. I don't know how much the message, "Standby for a voice from heaven" weighed, but probably less than that. Pigeons have been used in military campaigns to send messages to the people at home. Stockbrokers and bankers relied on pigeons to carry news of the markets before there were telephones or the internet.

There must be more to this symbolism than the dove (pigeon) as a messenger. This seems a little too simple and too much like the metaphors from the high school students. "The Holy Spirit brings messages like a pigeon that brings messages." As far as Christian symbols go, the way the dove has been represented isn't particularly inspiring. It has come to represent something polite and petite and pure. That may be why I prefer a Holy Spirit like a flamingo. In her book, *Consider the Birds*, Debbie Blue writes, "Isn't it sort of limiting to imagine the spirit of God as something dainty and white? We are made of dirt, according to the creation account in Genesis. We are full of bacteria. We each carry two to five pounds of bacteria in our bodies---two to five pounds. We could kill a dove with one or two blows from the back of our hand. We need a spirit that can handle us...Surely we need God's Spirit to be less easily done away with...Not some fragile naïve princess dressed in white unaware or untainted by the ways of the world."⁴ I have to agree, so I did some research.

It turns out that outside of Christianity doves have a completely different reputation. The Babylonian goddess, Ishtar, was often depicted as a dove. She was sexy and promiscuous. "She's more of everything that pulls at humanity all rolled up into one:

⁴ Blue, 6.

passion and jealousy and anger and sex.”⁵ She is the goddess of war, fertility, and love. And she had a bad habit of leaving her intimate partners dead or maimed. Her story is fun,

Similarly, Aphrodite, Venus, and the Canaanite goddess, **Asherah**, all goddesses of love and fertility are each associated with doves. There is strong evidence in archaeological records, that many ancient Israelites believed the goddess Asherah was the partner of their god Yahweh. Perhaps that explains why the heirs of this Israelite religion incorporated the symbol of the dove to represent the spirit of God. That is definitely more interesting. ⁶

I’ve learned that pigeons are known for their voracious sex lives. To get pigeons to fly home fast, competitive pigeon racers will sometimes place a pigeon couple together and then pack one of the pigeons up and drive it away. When released, the pigeon flies back home fast. Pigeons mate any season of the year and have many babies. Yet, with all their friskiness, they usually mate for life. Much like humans, however, these lovers can also be fighters. I’ve learned that anyone who spends much time watching pigeons in confined quarters would observe pigeons picking fights with each other, even their mates. Pigeons are complicated.

The rock pigeons found in our cities are relatives of populations of established domestic pigeons that escaped. People who talk about birds and who know things refer to them as feral pigeons. “The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a feral pigeon.” Perfect.

Other birds do everything they can to get away from humans and we can’t blame them. We don’t have a great track record when it comes to caring for anything in the natural world. But pigeons want to be close to us. So much so that we are annoyed by them. We call them “rats with wings.” They are pests that infest urban areas. Cities try to get rid of them, usually unsuccessfully. The Holy Spirit, like a pigeon, refuses to leave us alone, is always underfoot, and sometimes we don’t like it. We like to do our own thing without anybody telling us what to do, we don’t need anything hovering over us trying to get us to act right.

The more I learn about these birds, the more I feel like this metaphor is right up there with fire and wind, the more inspired I am by the idea of the Holy Spirit as a dove (or pigeon). She is a harbinger of good news, a fierce lover, and an equally fierce fighter. She wants to be with human beings even though we often aren’t very nice to her. She hangs around to the point of causing us to trip over her, but to be fair, sometimes that’s what it takes to get our attention. Blue writes, “Maybe she is so common, [basically] wherever life is, that we don’t recognize her or respect her. And it occurs to me that maybe we don’t recognize her because we are looking for something pure and white, but the spirit of God is more complicated than that...fuller,

⁵ Blue, 7.

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richer, everywhere. Perhaps we've read the dove all wrong...it is not pure as the driven snow. Maybe we are too hung up on purity. God, after all, created LIFE (everything swarming, creeping, fruitful and multiplying). Maybe the Holy Spirit of God is more creative than puritan. Maybe we are mistaken about what holy means" ("she" pronouns are mine).⁷

Maybe all of life is holy. The messiness and tidiness. The smelliness and the sweet fragrances. The tears and the laughter. The fear and the love. The anger and the forgiveness. Every bit of it is holy and there God is, inspiring and empowering, encouraging us to be the people we were created to be, when we act right and when we don't. The spirit of God has descended on all of us like a dove and I promise you, she will never leave you alone. Amen.

⁷ Blue, 12.