

“God’s Spirit ... like a dove”

Matthew 3:13-17

A sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes

for A Sermon for Every Sunday

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Some of my favorite artwork is the artwork I receive from children in my congregation at the end of a service. I expect that adults doodle in worship, as well, but the children are most likely to show me their drawings and even make a *gift* of those drawings. I especially love it when kids draw what they see or hear about during our worship. It shows that they’re paying attention! It can even be a way for them to pray.

Well, last year, on Baptism of the Lord Sunday, it was abundantly clear which part of the story had captured our kids’ attention: it was the spirit of God descending like a dove. (I received several pictures of doves, some recognizable as such!) The dove descending is an especially vivid part of the gospel story, and it’s reinforced visually for kids in my congregation. In our sanctuary, you can spot multiple images of doves – most notably atop the baptismal font! That’s because, as every one of the gospels describes Christ’s baptism, God’s Holy Spirit is said to descend on him like a dove. So the dove is one of the most popular symbols for God’s Holy Spirit.

Of course, the dove is not the only symbol we have for God’s Spirit. In the Pentecost story, when the Spirit comes to the disciples, the Spirit comes as *wind*, reminiscent of the wind that blew over the waters when God created the heavens and the earth. The wind at Pentecost calls attention to the Holy Spirit breathing life into the Church. *Fire* is another common representation of God’s Spirit. The fire that appeared on Pentecost reminds us of the burning bush through which God spoke to Moses, and the pillar of fire that led God’s people through the wilderness. The symbol of fire calls attention to the strength and force of God’s Spirit. And in some places the Bible says we’re made to *drink* of God’s Spirit. Like *water* the Spirit refreshes and cleanses us.¹ Theologians and poets throughout the years have read what the Bible says about God’s Spirit and have imagined the Spirit in fresh ways: as the life-giving womb of God . . . as a wind song through the trees or a secret wrapped in smoke or an inexhaustible stream . . . as a spiritual midwife or a storm that melts mountains. One image I particularly like comes from the Iona Community. The dove is too meek for their taste. They say that, in light of the disruptive and uncontrollable movements the Spirit makes, a more fitting symbol may be the wild goose.

But . . . what about the dove?

When Jesus is baptized . . . when John pulls him, dripping, from the waters of the Jordan, God’s Spirit descends like a dove and alights on Jesus. While doves are

¹ <http://www.loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/family/catholic-teens/scripture-background-for-teens/symbols-of-the-holy-spirit>

mentioned here and there throughout the scriptures, this story of the spirit descending like a dove would have brought one particular story to the mind of Jesus or any good Jew: the story of Noah in the book of Genesis – Noah, who was similarly dripping wet, and similarly visited by a dove.

So let's think for a moment about the story of Noah, and what it might have been like for him to emerge from 40 days and 40 nights of torrential rain, a terrifying flood – a flood that was the culmination of so many other terrifying events. Even before the flood, *the world had become ruined*, the scriptures say – all of it. We have no stories, no details about what was happening . . . but Genesis points to a time when every thought people had was evil – evil continually. The earth was corrupt, filled with violence. All flesh had corrupted its ways, says Genesis. What God had made good had disintegrated somehow, until it was worse than the worst war zone . . . more violent than the most violent terrorist cell . . . darker than the darkest alley. The whole world had become a place of fear, a place of murder and evil and wretchedness, such that God regretted having made it at all.²

Imagine the weight of that – not only the chaos of the flood, but the years of chaos that proceeded it. How heavy and weary and hopeless Noah and his family must have felt as their ark drifted across the waters, across all they had ever known. It must have felt like the end of the world. Then *a single dove* returned to them with an olive branch in its beak! A green and living thing. A sign that this *wasn't* the end. There was life out there: *new life*. There were *growing things*. There was a safe and solid place they could start over. *What relief* they must have felt, seeing that dove – that first evidence God had not forgotten them, and God's promise of a fresh start would come true.

When we talk about our baptism – well, when *I* talk about our baptism – I usually focus on the cheerful aspects: how we're washed clean and made new by the Holy Spirit. How we're freed, like the Hebrew people were freed from slavery when God parted the Red Sea. How God claims us and calls us beloved. These are all true, all-important aspects of our baptism. But there's the flood, too – the *drowning* of evil in us and around us . . . evil that has run so hard and so rampant, we need God to destroy it. We need God to help us start over.

Just think about all the things that overwhelm people and crush us and leave us gasping for breath. Things like financial ruin . . . or cancer cells spreading . . . or sexual assault . . . or remorse over mistakes we've made . . . or addiction or anger or grief. So many things can flood our hearts, our minds, our lives, and overwhelm us.

Some years ago the Christian author Anne Lamott shared her son Sam's blogpost entitled, "How I managed not to kill myself yesterday."³ He began by naming the pain of

² Andreas Schuele, *The Primeval History (Gen 1-11)* Mark E. Biddle, trans., as drafted for the Zurich Bible Commentary Series, in Richmond 2008. 34.

³ <http://www.hellohumans.co/blog/how-i-managed-not-to-kill-myself-yesterday>

the holiday season – the “onslaught of commercialism and happiness (genuine or not) . . . [a] painful reminder of the things we don't feel, [Sam said, the] objects we can't afford, and missing pieces we don't have. It is an exercise in endurance and grit,” and Sam was glad to have survived it - *literally*, glad to have survived. Still he found himself exhausted, and he shared that a few days earlier he'd called the suicide prevention lifeline. It was a turn of events he found embarrassing to admit, he said, “as these thoughts are confusing and don't match up with the wonderful life I actually have in front of me. I felt guilty and ashamed, [Sam went on] and I didn't have the strength to call anybody in my regular support network of friends and loved ones.” He was drowning. But the Spirit showed up like a dove and alighted on him. Sam didn't call it that; I'm calling it that: how the folks at the suicide prevention lifeline listened to Sam and helped him see that this *wasn't* the end. There was life out there – a reason to live, a place to start again.

And next week, as we remember Martin Luther King, Jr., we remember how, for him, fear could rise like a flood. In one of his sermons, he talked about it, how after one particularly tense week during which King had been arrested and had received numerous threatening calls, he attended one of the bus protest meetings in Montgomery and addressed the group. He tried desperately to project an image of strength and courage, when deep down, King said, what he felt was fear and depression. Then an elderly woman – a woman affectionately called Mother Pollard – a poor and uneducated yet brilliant and wise woman – approached King and said, “Something is wrong with you. You didn't talk strong tonight.” King denied it; he wanted to keep his fears to himself. But she said, “You can't fool me. I knows something is wrong. Is it that we ain't doing things to please you ... or is it that the white folks is bothering you?” And before King could answer, she looked directly into his eyes and said, “I don told you we is with you all the way.” Then “with a countenance beaming with quiet certainty she concluded, ‘but even if we ain't with you, God's gonna take care of you.’ Everything in me quivered [King said . . . quivered] with the pulsing tremor of raw energy when she uttered these consoling words.” And Mother Pollard's words came back to King, time and again, “amid howling winds of pain and jostling storms of adversity” . . . her words gave peace to King's troubled soul. “God's gonna take care of you.”⁴

When I think of the Holy Spirit descending like a dove, I think of those moments our hope is rekindled, even when the floodwaters are high, and we have nowhere to go quite yet. The Spirit comes to us in pulsing tremors of raw energy, or moments of serenity, or when something strikes us as funny, and we know: there's life out there. The Spirit comes to us in well-timed offers of help, or in a story that inspires us, or in a delicious meal, and we remember: the world is still beautiful. The Spirit comes to us at

⁴ <https://swap.stanford.edu/20141218225641/http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/primarydocuments/Vol6/July1962-March1963DraftofChapterXIV,TheMasteryofFearorAntidotesforFear.pdf>

important moments in our lives (as in Jesus' life), and we glimpse our reason for hope – which is ultimately God's faithfulness and love no flood can drown. With signs of that love, those promises, and life beyond what we can see, God's Spirit comes like a dove at the end of a long and terrible flood. It's a sign that God will help us to start again.

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