

**Consider the Birds: the Pigeon**

Acts 2:1-13

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It happened a few years ago now, back when I lived in New York City. I was out for an early morning walk with Annie, my dog. We were out on our normal route down Fifth Avenue. There were only a few other people out. I passed the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where the grounds staff were spraying down the steps and a couple of merchants were setting up shop, preparing for another day of selling art along the sidewalk. At that hour it was as peaceful as that stretch of Fifth Avenue ever got, so I let my mind wander, until out of nowhere, Annie and I were dive-bombed by a pigeon. There's really no other way to put it. It came out of the air from behind us and headed directly for the ground, missing my head, and then Annie's, by about *this* much. I screamed and Annie barked, utterly disrupting the early morning silence. One of the artists, trying not to laugh at me (failing, I might add, but trying) said, "Woo-boy! That bird just about gotcha," he said. "You better watch out."

The very first story in the Bible includes birds. We've talked about this. In Genesis 1, God says, "Let birds fly" and "Let the birds multiply." But even before God creates the birds, the Spirit of God hovers over the face of the deep. The ancient rabbis suggested the Spirit hovered like a bird. The Talmud even specifies what kind of bird: a dove. "The Spirit of God hovered over the surface of the waters like a dove," it reads. That same dove is a messenger of hope for Noah and everyone else on the ark, as the floodwaters begin to recede after the chaos of the long storm. And it shows up again when Jesus is baptized. Jesus goes

under the water, and the Holy Spirit descends on him, scripture tells us. All four gospels describe it the same way: the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus "like a dove."

This image is so strong that by now, whenever we think of the Spirit, the descriptors and metaphors we reach for almost always have feathers. But how would your feelings about the Holy Spirit — or your expectations of the Holy Spirit — change if I told you that a dove is actually a pigeon by another name?

For the record, this time, it's not about ancient languages or interpretive choices. It's science. There is no biological distinction between the birds we call doves and the birds we call pigeons. Debbie Blue, a theologian, biblical scholar, and amateur ornithologist has written about this extensively. She says, "There are a great variety of birds that we call either pigeons or doves. They are all in the same family. We tend to call the more delicate, smaller members of the family 'doves,' and the larger, more aggressive members of the family 'pigeons,' but the names are, in fact, entirely interchangeable."<sup>1</sup>

When we come to the day of Pentecost itself, like Dale read for us out of Acts, "there was a rush of violent wind." Some of the language in this story is borrowed straight from the creation story to ensure we understand: the same Spirit that hovers over the waters now rushes over the people. There's no bird, not technically, but it is the same Spirit, and I can't help but observe that this Pentecost Spirit seems to have awful lot in common with my pigeon experience on Fifth Avenue. But we'll

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<sup>1</sup> Debbie Blue, in *Consider the Birds*. Most of the facts related to pigeons come from her excellent book.

come back to that.

My friend and colleague Tom Are, taught me something about Pentecost I've never forgotten. This story contains an incredible list of people and places: Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene. The people came from everywhere. But here is what Tom taught me about that: the people on that day, they didn't just come from every place. They came from every time, too.

Luke, (and by the way, the same Luke of the Gospel is also credited with the book of Acts), Luke says there were Medes there that day. But hearing that Medes were there that day, would be like you hearing me announce that next week, Molly Spangler is leading a class about reading scripture as a family, John Cook is coordinating a graduation celebration for college students, Rowena Nylund is inviting everyone to purchase Cafe Justo coffee, Jennifer Mitchell is planning a new art exhibit in the atrium, Matt McCall is resuming his hymn study video series, and Thomas Jefferson is giving a presentation on religious liberty. If you heard that, you'd assume I'd gotten some facts wrong.

Luke says there were Medes there on the day of Pentecost, but the Medes had vanished from the pages of history hundreds of years before. So some have argued that Luke is just sloppy. That he gets his information wrong. But Luke is the one who begins his gospel by saying he is writing down an orderly account so that everyone might know the truth. Luke knows exactly what he is saying. Luke is telling us not what is factual, but what is true. And the truth is that the church, the community gathered by the Spirit of God, includes not only people from every place, but also people from every time. God's redemptive work in the world includes everyone, absolutely everyone, and will not be thwarted by anything, not even the realities of human history. In other words, Luke tells us, whatever we think we know, the Spirit

always knows more, and the Spirit always knows better.

My friend Taylor is the pastor of a church in Georgia. Shortly after she arrived there, she read through the minutes of the church's first Session meeting in 1896. The purpose of that meeting, the old minutes report, was to provide a written record to the Presbytery detailing the names of those in worship attendance, an assessment of the efficacy of the church's biblical instruction, an evaluation of how well members observed the Sabbath, and an accounting of special outpourings of the Holy Ghost. (That's a quote, by the way.)

According to the minutes, worship attendance was good, biblical instruction was good, Sabbath-keeping was good, and outpourings of the Holy Ghost was listed at "none." One hundred years later, in the 1990s, a member writing the history of the church observed, "As long as this question was asked of us, the answer was almost always, 'none.' I asked myself," she wrote, "Was this really true? How did Session interpret the Holy Spirit? Were we really devoid of the Spirit's movement all those years?"

It took almost a full century before the record was set right. A sermon detailing their history was preached, the congregation agreed, and the Session voted, that "outpourings of the Holy Ghost" had indeed been abundant. "None," the church's history book went on to report, could only be understood as theological hogwash.

What was true in Statesboro, Georgia is true in Columbia, South Carolina, and anywhere else Christians gather, be it in person, online, or some other way: we do not always recognize what the Spirit is doing, or how the Spirit is doing it, but that does not mean the Spirit is missing in action.

Not that anyone has been counting, but it has been 61 Sundays since we were last in this place. And all along the way, we have been wondering, How long will it be? Can a church

survive such a thing? Will giving continue? Will anyone come back? What will we learn? Who will we be when this is all over? Who will I be? Is there still a place for me? Do I really have to sit outside, is anyone really going to show up at 9 am, and will God really find me if I'm not allowed to sit in my regular seat?

Silly or serious or somewhere in between, the question behind all those questions really is, Are we going to make it? After everything that's happened, are we going to be okay?

I imagine that is what the first church was thinking before it was even officially a church. Followers of Christ, disciples, apostles, and all the rest, were shaken after he disappeared in death and returned in resurrection, and then left again in ascension. Their reality kept shifting, and they knew that so much had changed, but they weren't entirely sure what that meant, yet. They, like us, were just making their way forward one step at a time.

And into that uncertain space comes Pentecost, the Holy Spirit rushing down over everyone. Transcending time and space. Proving to be bigger than everything we think we know, or even bigger than everything we don't know. Gathering us all under one wing, reassuring us that even though we are still technically scattered across multiple services and way too many pews and at least three different media platforms, we **are** going to make it. We **are** going to be okay. Because while we might have been missing from this place, the Spirit has not been missing in action, not for a second. And like Luke teaches us, the Spirit has never before been thwarted by the reality of human history and she isn't about to be now.

Because the Holy Spirit is like a pigeon. Do you know how resilient and resourceful pigeons are? They have to be. There are more than 4 million pigeons in New York City alone. And the city has tried everything to get rid of them. They've molded plastic hawks to scare

them and released real hawks to hunt them. City workers have installed speakers emitting predator calls and covered windowsills with sticky gels and smelly oils. They've erected spikes and strung netting and passed ordinances making it illegal to feed them. My previous church in the city budgeted ten thousand dollars a year for "pigeon abatement" on our property alone, and you know what? All for naught. Pigeons are everywhere, and nothing seems to discourage them. They aren't going anywhere. Even if you catch them and physically take them somewhere else, they always find their way back.

Did you know that? The pigeon's astonishing homing abilities have helped shape the world as we know it. Genghis Khan used them to create an information network across Asian and Eastern Europe. The Reuters news service was built on pigeon wings. The ancient Greeks used them to report back competition results during the first Olympic games. And in the First World War, a single pigeon was credited with saving the lives of nearly 200 men in France. With a bullet in her breast, Cher Ami, as she was known, delivered a critical message in a capsule wrapped to a leg that, by the time she arrived, was attached by only a single tendon.

Pigeons, you see, seem to survive just about anything. And they always find their way back home again, no matter how harrowing the circumstances, how narrow the odds, how risky the task. So here's the truth, Shandon. If the Holy Spirit is like a pigeon, and scripture tells us it is, we are going to be just fine.