



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# My Favorite Bible Bird

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In the book of Job, we hear the wisdom "...ask the beasts, and let them teach you; and the birds of the heavens, and let them tell you (Job 12:7).

Scripture is filled with owls, hawks, eagles, sparrows, vultures, ravens, pelicans; myriad birds to speak to us of divine things.

Last night, my husband and I lingered after walking the dogs to watch a bird of prey perched atop a utility pole near our home. This creature moved with arrogance, unfurling his wings while surveying the prey, as if to say, "this is my 'hood,". Had I not so much invested in the dove for today's sermon, we would explore the hawk.

I chose the dove as a favorite bird since they appear throughout scripture and has a starring role in Jesus' baptism.

Please pray with me,  
*Spirit of God, silence the noise around us, descend into our lives and startle us with your abiding presence. We pray you will illuminate these words of scripture to know and trust your truth. Amen.*

Listen for God's word and the witness by John the Baptist to Jesus' baptism as recorded in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. 29-34

The next day John (the Baptist) saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

This is the one about whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is really greater than me because he existed before me.’

Even I didn’t recognize him, but I came baptizing with water so that he might be made known to Israel.”

John testified, “I saw the Spirit coming down from heaven like a dove, and it rested on him.

Even I didn’t recognize him, but God, who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘The one on whom you see the Spirit coming down and resting is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’

I have seen and testified that this one is God’s Son.”

*This is the word of the lord...thanks be to God.*

Years ago, I picked-up a 5x7” postcard of a Norman Rockwell painting at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian in NYC; they offered it as their welcome card.

The image captivated me so much I framed it for my office. When I first ventured into the Senior Pastor’s office here, at

Westminster, this same Rockwell painting greeted me. I felt welcomed.

As with any Rockwell, an initial glance at the image and you may think you “I’ve got it.” Painted in 1957, it captures the busy streets of the front steps and arched entrance to St Thomas Episcopal Church on 5<sup>th</sup> Ave.

Pedestrians crowd the sidewalk, walking in both directions, eyes to the pavement, shoulders hunched over, while the nose of a Yellow Cab edges in the drab scene.

On the steps to cathedral’s entrance, a robed minister directs a custodian, who stands on a ladder, to change the title of the sermon within the building’s signage.

Everyone is focused on the task at hand, just like a busy New York minute, not wasting a second nor aware of anything or anyone else.

So, consider the irony of the scripture passage printed on the bottom of the postcard: “I lift my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth” from Psalm 121. (As an aside, one of my favorite psalms.)

I find it to be one of Rockwell's more sobering images.

People detached from one another, hustling towards the next event, or retreating from some past encounter, not be

present with anything at all, even themselves. It is as if the present does not exist.

Rather than dismiss the scene as an image of hopelessness, if you look closely, perhaps, a dozen doves ascend from the eaves skyward.

You could easily miss them since the color of their wings fade into the granite within the arched entrance.

Only the birds of the air seem attuned with their maker, not only lifting their eyes, but their entire bodies to God.

Through the birds, Rockwell whispers, “pay attention, there is hope.”

In human imagination, birds have mediated between the heavens and the earth. Their freedom to traverse the skies or startle us with their songs raises our eyes to the skies, literally and metaphorically.<sup>1</sup>

Since ancient times the dove has symbolized God’s divine spirit.

The early Israelites imagined it hovering over the waters of creation, pregnant with possibility.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bernd Heirich, “Angels in Our Midst,” Book review of *The Wonder of Birds* by Jim Robbins (Spiegel & Grau, 2017) *Wall Street Journal*, Saturday/Sunday, June 3-4, 2017, C9.

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Willette, “The Enduring Symbolism of Doves,” *Biblical Archaeology*, 11/02/2016 <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/daily-life-and-practice/the-enduring-symbolism-of-doves/> Accessed June 15, 2021.

After the rain had subsided, Noah relied upon the dove to search for solid ground. It returned with the message of land – and the end of chaos – by bearing an olive leaf.

In ancient Israelite worship, the dove's imagined purity and innocence made it was the only bird acceptable for sacrifice.

In the Gospel of Luke, a dove alighted upon Mary at the incarnation of Jesus, again pregnant with God's possibility.

And all the gospels record a dove at Jesus' baptism, embodying God's Holy Spirit descending from heaven. Even the word "descent" is code language indicating a divine origin.

Most western art depicts a genteel and sanitized image of Jesus' baptism: the tidy banks of the Jordan River, John the Baptist and Jesus in crisp linens, with a dove gently alighting Jesus' shoulder.

Ornithologist, Sally Roth, disabused me of my placid image with; "(a) dove's descent is not slow and gradual but rather an 'oh my God' moment with sudden appearance.

They do not glide in from afar, but with swift maneuverability, they come in at high speed, close their wings and drop like a rock, pulling up at the last instant to flutter to a stop, flaring out their tail and throwing it forward to aid in braking."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sally Roth, *An Eye on the Sparrow* (Laporte, CO: Happy Crab Publishing, 2013), 209.

Now, let's re-imagine Jesus' baptism. Walking throughout Galilee, a valley filled with mud until summer heat turns it to dust, he arrives with filthy clothes.

He wades into the cloudy Jordan waters, approaches John the Baptist, who must have smelled to high heaven, with dreadlocks down his back and animal skins for clothing, usually barking at the people, calling them "broods of vipers," and then this dove thunders in from nowhere.

Jesus' baptism was an earthy, cosmic, and explosive experience.

But the spirit did not just appear and then vanish. Rather, John the Baptist claims the spirit rested.

Birds of flight do not "rest" on people. By this simple statement, the gospel writer drives home the point of this dove serving as God's divine presence, very startling and enduring.

The spirit tethers Jesus' finite, mortal existence to his divine origin and to the eternal.

Rather than thinking of his baptism and our baptism in the spirit as a single event, the spirit remains, forever.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, "Holy Spirit" *New and Enlarged Handbook of Christian Theology*, Ed Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 20013) 246



When we baptize a child later this morning, we say “you are a child of the covenant, sealed by the spirit in your baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ, forever.”

The spirit did not shield Jesus from adversity, rather in the long arc of each gospel, we grow to understand the spirit equipped him with the strength and grace for the vigorous struggle he encountered each and every day and for the battle that will take his life.

The spirit is resilient. The spirit remains.<sup>5</sup>

These past sixteen months tested each of us, this church, the community, our families.

The pandemic, racial demonstrations, the ongoing partisan bickering, and gun violence, remind us of just how fraught with tension our lives are.

Life is messy. There is so little we can control. It can be heartbreakingly difficult when tragedy strikes out of nowhere.

We cannot avoid reality pretending everything is fine. When failure happens or trauma persists, we survive by becoming resilient.

Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, learned more about resilience than she imagined following the sudden death of

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<sup>5</sup> Katharine Hargrove “Why a Dove,” *Worship* 38, no. 2: 62-67. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost*, 63-65.

her husband. In an instant, she became a single parent to their two small children – something she never imagined, and she became a widow – something she never imagined.

The indomitable Sandberg, who had inspired women to just *Lean-In* as her first book was titled, admits her husband's death crippled her.

Her later book, *Option B*, Sandberg recounts her struggles to take a breath, and another breath, wipe away tears and more tears, and rebuild.

It couples her story with Wharton psychologist Adam Grant's insight to navigate life's traumas.

Resilience is not something we are born with or a character trait like optimism, rather Sandberg and Grant write, "resilience is the strength and speed of our response to adversity – and we build it. It is not about having a backbone. It's about strengthening the muscles around our backbone."

Coached by Grant through her grief, Sandberg learned to build resilience by the daily habits and stories she told herself.

Over time she had to learn her grief was not pervasive – it would not affect all areas of her life. And the trauma she and

her children endured would not be permanent – her children would grow up to lead full lives and she would as well.<sup>6</sup>

She had to be fully present with all her emotions, accept each day as it unfolds, and, step-by-step, live.

There was no value in clinging to the past...or imagining a future in which the pain would be erased or never be healed: resilience demands living in the present.

Sandberg's grief, recovery, and capacity to create resilience was not solitary. The authors reflect; "(r)esilience is not just built in individuals. It is built among individuals...when we build resilience together, we become stronger ourselves and form communities that can overcome obstacles and prevent adversity. Collective resilience requires more than shared hope – it is fueled by shared experiences, shared narratives, and shared power."<sup>7</sup>

As Christians, stories of tragedy and hymns of sorrow permeate scripture. Yet, we tend to skip over them and go to the texts that offer pleasantries.

A wise pastor reminded me that one-third of the psalms are voices railing at God with "how could you let this happen to me?" Or "where were you?"

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<sup>6</sup> Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant, *Option B* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), 10-16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

Go ahead and ask them. It is healthier for someone in the midst of gut-wrenching trauma to admit how hard life is rather than try to push aside the pain with that little Christian lie, “I know God does not give me more than I can handle.”

Nothing could be further from the truth. Life does throw at us – all too often – more than we can handle.

By turning to God every day, and particularly in times of trial, we may not find the answer we want, but we grow to realize God did not inflict the trauma, rather the spirit of God remains with us, even when we have lost our ability to hope.

We weather the storms of life by building spiritual resilience in this church community, a collection of baptized who embrace us, offer us the grace to start again, and walk with us in all the sorrows and joys of life.

At the 11:00 a.m. service, we will baptize a young boy, promising to care for him just as those who came before us loved us into faith and life.

Through worship, and service, and prayer, and standing with one another, we build strength in the spirit for ourselves and one another. Our baptism promises extend from a single worship service to the common hours of life.

At the end of our days, when we lay to rest our loved ones, we proclaim their baptism in the spirit is now complete, confident they rest with God.

Let's return to the Norman Rockwell image we started with of the pedestrians crowding in NYC and attempt to imagine the scene today.

The minister would be wearing the same robe, engaged in the same activity, the cab might be an Uber, and the pedestrians would still be self-absorbed, but not staring at the sidewalk. Instead, they'd be staring at their smartphones.

We have a nagging concern with being connected, all the time. We behave as if our phones sustain us.

Phone-obsessed pedestrians cannot begin to notice the birds, but if they did, they would realize they are probably not doves, honestly, but pigeons.

But that does not diminish any of the divine connection, since pigeons and doves are of the same bird family. Pigeons are just a bit larger. They coo. They sooth. They remain amidst the noise and drama of life.

Pigeon or dove...they remind us of the enduring connection between heaven and earth. Stop to consider God's spirit remains with you.

Pause to say a prayer of thanks to those who carried you through tough times and how your faithful presence carries others.



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