

Come Down, O Love Divine

Pentecost 2009

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*Like the murmur of the dove's song,
like the challenge of her flight,
like the vigor of the wind's rush,
like the new flame's eager might:
come, Holy Spirit, come. (Hymn 513)*

I want to talk to you today about birds. This time of year, of course, we are keenly aware of their presence: we awaken to their beautiful song, welcome after the long winter, when all of nature seems to hold its breath. We watch them dip in our bird baths and soar from tree to tree, building nests for their young. This morning, as I got ready for church, I could hear the nesting robins in the tree outside our bedroom window. I wait impatiently for the first robin, the first red wing blackbird. In winter, we do have chickadees, sparrows, finches, cardinals, juncos, and the great flocks of awkward, ugly wild turkeys.

When I was a child, wild turkeys were something I only heard about in stories of the first Thanksgiving. But fifteen years ago, maybe a bit more, they became numerous in this area, and I was delighted by them. I mean, how many birds do we see who bring us to a screeching halt on a country road—like sheep—so that they can take their pokey time crossing to the other side? One day, several years ago now, I was driving to my spiritual director in Newaygo when I had to wait on such a flock. I had been mulling something over: I no longer remember what, but it was spiritually important at that time in my life. As I sat waiting for the turkeys to move along, I was overwhelmed by a palpable sense of God's presence. From that time, I can never see turkeys in the fields without recalling that day, marveling that God's spirit comes to us in many forms, some of them quite unexpected.

A few years later, Sherrie, the daughter of my friends Ron and Margaret, died of ovarian cancer in her late twenties. Close to the time of her death, she dreamed about a bird that was trying without success to get out of a tent on the beach along Lake Michigan where Sherry and her family spent a lot of time in the summer. After Sherrie's death, her parents came to believe that her dream reflected her desire to escape her ill body, to move on to

eternal life. The day of her death, after we had washed and anointed Sherrie's body and prayed over her, her parents drove home to Clare, remarking to one another that they wanted a sign from God that their daughter was all right. As they drove along, a great blue heron rose up out of the marsh along the road. It was, for them, a magnificent assurance of God's presence, of the power of the Spirit.

Two years ago I had a Hospice patient—I will call her Sandy—who lived along a little lake. I saw many ducks and geese, but no herons, so one day I asked Sandy whether she had ever seen a great blue heron near her house: she had not. But the next time I arrived at her house, a great blue heron flew up out of the ditch where her driveway met the road. Sandy was not a woman of conventional faith, but for her, as for me, that bird was a spiritual event. On our next visit, I read for her a poem of Mary Oliver's, which I will now read for you:

Heron Rises From The Dark, Summer Pond

So heavy
is the long-necked, long-bodied heron,
always it is a surprise
when her smoke-colored wings

open
and she turns
from the thick water,
from the black sticks

of the summer pond,
and slowly
rises into the air
and is gone.

Then, not for the first or the last time,
I take the deep breath
of happiness, and I think
how unlikely it is

that death is a hole in the ground,

how improbable
 that ascension is not possible,
 though everything seems so inert, so nailed

back into itself--
 the muskrat and his lumpy lodge,
 the turtle,
 the fallen gate.

And especially it is wonderful
 that the summers are long
 and the ponds so dark and so many,
 and therefore it isn't a miracle

but the common thing,
 this decision,
 this trailing of the long legs in the water,
 this opening up of the heavy body

into a new life: see how the sudden
 gray-blue sheets of her wings
 strive toward the wind; see how the clasp of nothing
 takes her in.

Sandy was deeply moved: these images gave her some assurance that her arduous struggle with Lou Gehrig's disease was not the end, that there was healing after her body passed from this life. The poem was the central reading when I officiated her funeral, and I sent a copy of it to Ron and Margaret, who found comfort in its reflection on their experience so many years before.

On Pentecost, the Spirit did not descend as a dove, but rushed in with wind and fire. But in other places in the New Testament—Jesus's baptism, for example—the Spirit comes as a dove. In religious art, the Spirit is often portrayed as a dove. And no wonder, for birds soar on the back of the wind, a force we can't see, but whose power we feel. As Mary Oliver says, the great blue heron is not tied down to the ground, but "her wings strive toward the wind; see how the clasp of nothing takes her in."

What we learn on Pentecost is that the “clasp of nothing,” the unseen Spirit, took in the fearful disciples, loosening their tongues and strengthening their resolve to preach the Gospel to the known world. That same unseen Spirit takes us in as well. Whether we perceive the Spirit as flame, as wind, or bird—dove, turkey, great blue heron—that Spirit is God’s presence lifting us up out of ourselves. It is the power that gives us our creativity, our understanding, our gifts for service to the church and the world. It is the power that frees us from the bonds of earth, from the fear of our own light. The power that makes us more than we could ever be on our own, so that we, like the disciples, can radiate God’s love in a world that is often dark.

Today we celebrate the Spirit; we celebrate the birth of the Church. We remember a historical event, but we also rejoice in the new birth that happens year after year, day after day, in the lives of everyone who is open to the workings of the Spirit. Today is, frankly, a scary day, for the Spirit is a wild force, not housed in the buildings of the church, not tied down by the rules and regulations of the various denominations. Today’s feast reminds us that the church began in a kind of whirlwind: our challenge is to remember that, and to welcome the Spirit into our hearts.

James Baxter wrote a song to the Spirit that is included in “Midday Prayer” in *The New Zealand Prayer Book*. It is as beautiful as many of the Psalms, and I offer it to you as a kind of gift on this birthday of the Church:

Lord, Holy Spirit,
 You blow like the wind in a thousand paddocks,
 Inside and outside the fences,
 You blow where you wish to blow.

Lord, Holy Spirit,
 You are the sun who shines on the little plant,
 You warm him gently, you give him life,
 You raise him up to become a tree with many leaves.

Lord, Holy Spirit,
 You are as the mother eagle with her young,
 Holding them in peace under your feathers.
 On the highest mountain you have build your nest,
 Above the valley, above the storms of the world,

Where no hunger ever comes.

Lord, Holy Spirit,
You are the bright cloud in whom we hide,
In whom we know already that the battle has been won.
You bring us to our Brother Jesus
To rest our heads upon his shoulder.

Lord, Holy Spirit,
You are the kind fire who does not cease to burn,
Consuming us with flames of love and peace,
Driving us out like sparks to set the world on fire.

Lord, Holy Spirit,
In the love of friends you are building us a new house,
Heaven is with us when you are with us.
You are singing your song in the hearts of the poor.
Guide us, wound us, heal us. Bring us to the Father.

Amen, and Happy Birthday.