

## Descent of a Dove

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Acts 8; 14-17 and LK 3:21-22  
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Why a dove? Were doves common in Palestine? Not really, although a close cousin, the rock pigeon, was cultivated for food from early days in the Orient, and turtle-doves were sometimes offered for temple sacrifice. Ancients held that birds were augurs, or omens, and even today some of us see feathers as clues or communications from the skies, and Native Americans believe that blue herons “bear news of us to the heavens.” But why a dove? Why not a wren? Or even a pelican?

Actually, we’re not sure it was a dove that landed on Jesus’ head as he emerged from baptism. Scripture says it was “something like a dove.” We anthropomorphize animals, and we symbolize birds. So, something like a dove: something unexpected, not likely to be found on one’s head like a strange and sudden hat dropped from the skier!: something, therefore, significant. The importance here is not whether or not it was a bird, or even a dove, but that something significant is occurring and, as such, must be marked. The “something like a dove” says, “Look up! Take notice! There’s an important thing happening here!”

Have you ever visited the Butterfly Park up in Massachusetts? You can wander around inside this glass-ceilinged building, and innumerable butterflies will alight on your forehead and hands and arms. You feel blessed. Their touch is so light, their wings so filmy, their presence so improbable, their toleration of us such a privilege.

So, too, with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, always unpredictable, a force of and beyond nature, has chosen “something like a dove” and made a visitation so as to interact with Jesus. But not with Jesus alone. Jesus is chosen, he is designated and marked as God’s own through the descent of the dove-like phenomenon. And here, the symbol becomes relational, because God’s voice says, “this is My Son.” And then God says, “Listen to Him.” Now we, too, are part of this extraordinary moment. WE are called, and called upon, to listen and attend, to witness to this event, to be ourselves, marked by it.

Jesus is the one chosen by the dove but so are we—because we must see what is happening. And when we see it, we respond, we react. We, too, are changed, marked as God’s own. We can all be chosen by the Holy Spirit. And THAT is where the *miracles* begin.

The mystery of the third person of the Trinity, this “something like a dove” that homes out of the skies, may not so much be the identity of the Holy Spirit, but rather ... *how to receive* it ... (and why we all too often may *close ourselves* to it). The “something like a dove” may be strange, but it is not threatening. It may be alien to us, and yet it communicates. The feathery gesture of anointing, of choosing, is both imperative and gentle, an encouraging caress, like the flutterings of butterflies. The flight of the dove is an enabling arrow, offering transforming energy.

Rather than fear or doubt the descent of the dove, perhaps we may change our hearts and, like the apostles at Jerusalem, actively pray for its appearance, its mandate and blessing:

Peter and John went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit—for as yet the Spirit had not come upon nay of them.—Then Peter and John laid

hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.

Imagine another baptismal scene:

Gathered at the river, the crowd is silent, expectant. One woman with a young child speaks little. Her child is crippled. She has brought him to be baptized together with her. “The sky is overcast, there’s a shower of rain. The water is warm. Those who are to be baptized wade out into the water, first the women, then the men. The crippled child is also carried along and immersed.”

The Spirit touches down. Something like a dove hovers, broods over the face of the water. A new Creation.

“After her baptism, the crippled child’s mother stands knee-deep in the water with tears running down her cheeks. Water and the Spirit have come over her. Now she’s in the heavenly kingdom. When her child was immersed, he moved his little legs.”\*

Might we all not pray for the descent of something like a dove into our hearts?

Might we all not yearn for crippled limbs to stir?

Send us, Lord, something like a dove.+

\*”*The Left Hand of God: A Biography of the Holy Spirit* Adolf Hull (Doubleday, 1992).