

Dove or Flame?

When you think of an image representing the Holy Spirit, what image comes into your mind? On Pentecost when answering that question the image is most likely to involve a dramatic entrance with the sound of a rushing wind and the appearance of flames. In the Hebrew Scriptures almost every encounter with God involves fire and wind; yet here did you ever notice that in Acts it is only the sound “like” the rush of a violent wind mentioned; there is no mention of wind actually blowing into the room. And the description of the flames...well that appearance was described as being “divided tongues, as of fire appearing among them with one tongue resting on each of them. But again, there is no indication that there is any heat involved or that anything was burnt. The narrative which is found in Acts is certainly dramatic...and the change which occurs immediately afterword in the lives and actions of the disciples is certainly a radical one, from hiding in a locked room to standing and preaching in the public square in the midst of the religious festival that was the Jewish Pentecost celebration. Central to what happens immediately is that Peter’s behavior certainly changes. Peter who had resisted Jesus’ description of suffering and death being what the anointing of him as Messiah truly meant; he had been distressed when Jesus knelt to wash his feet demonstrating a model of serving instead of being served, and then after swearing absolute loyalty he has denied even knowing Jesus immediately after Jesus’ arrest. After the arrival of the Paraclete he has now gone out into the public square to proclaim just who this “Jesus” is. The coming of the Spirit among them results in a complete overturning of the world view of all the disciples, not just Peter’s. Their understanding of their heritage and the place of that heritage in the world is altered. When we pray, Come Holy Spirit...is that what we are asking to come into our lives? A radical change in how we view the world? An accepting of God’s vision of inclusive love. Our scriptures tell us the Israelites followed a pillar of fire through the wilderness; Elijah found God’s presence in sheer silence after the rushing wind went past the cave where he had taken shelter. Ezekiel portrays the presence of God through wind that reassembles dry bones and then breathes life into them. In the gospel accounts of Jesus’ baptism, when the voice from heaven made a proclamation what was seen was the Spirit descending like a dove, but despite the images we make of this scene, scripture does not say it was actually a dove. Yet we most often represent the Holy Spirit as a dove. I have a picture of a different artist’s representation of the Holy Spirit. I have placed it in the narthex for this morning. So what image do you feel most describes your experience of the Holy Spirit? Flame or dove? Do you associate the Holy Spirit more through the aspect of being a guide, a source of strength, or of comfort? Throughout scripture there is another word frequently used to describe the presence of the Holy Spirit in various situations. In Genesis it is God’s spirit—God’s ruah רֹּחַ which moves over the void, and later gives life to the dirt which God has formed into his own image. This word is translated as wind, but also as breathe in addition to Spirit. A second narration of the Holy Spirit being given to the disciples is found in John’s gospel. It is not nearly as dramatic and although the results are not described in the text, it is evident that the disciples did not remain in that locked room very long. In John’s account the disciples did not have to wait fifty days for the Spirit to come to them. On the same day that the tomb was discovered empty, Jesus appears to the disciples greeting them with the tradition Shalom,

which is translated as Peace be with you. He tells them to not “let their hearts be troubled” and then he breathes on them giving them the Holy Spirit which will remain with them when he leaves them. There is something very intimate in this description of the giving of the Holy Spirit. It echoes the central aspect of Jesus’ Farewell Address to the disciples in John’s gospel when he told them that not only were he and the Father One, but phrased it that he was in the Father and the Father was in him. That describes an intimate relationship. He also said the disciples, because they believed and trusted in him, he was in them and they were in him in that same type of intimate relationship. Breathing is very much a function of all life...the breathe of God into the formed dirt gave life to the dirt...the breath of Jesus giving life to the disciples mission to complete what he has started. This giving of the breath of life will be the bringing of God’s reign among humanity; it gave life to the first community of believers. Has any event in recent history caused us to think more about this essential act of respiration, of breathing than the global pandemic of Covid-19 over the last couple of years? Respiration is how we live, but it is also as recently demonstrated, the vehicle for spreading around whatever is in our lungs and noses. “Breath” or “spirit” may be invisible (except on cold winter mornings) but it is not for that reason any less powerful a phenomenon. Yet like seeing our own breath, the image and understanding of “spirit” can be elusive. Frederick Buechner noted that the word “spirit” has gotten drained of meaning in our culture through overuse. We hear about “school spirit”, “team spirit”, the “Spirit of ‘76” and “the Christmas spirit”. But it can be difficult to define exactly what “spirit” means in any of these contexts. Also the adjective “spiritual” has not fared any better. This word is found all over the place recently and can be applied to everything from genuinely pious Christian faith all the way over to someone talking about the “zen of economics”. People described as “spiritual” may be those who attend a worship service regularly or those who go into wilderness areas so they can meditate on the unity of sky, rock and soul. Buechner also pointed out that while we cannot deny that for all this vapory, insubstantial features, the “spirit” of something can also be strong and contagious. It is remarkably easy for a very calm and quiet person to get whipped up into enthusiasm by the “spirit” of a crowd at a political rally or at a basketball game. So whichever version of the arrival of the Holy Spirit that we celebrate on Pentecost, what we celebrate is the time that God’s Spirit came upon those who would first proclaim Jesus to the world and change it forever. If we do not seek to understand the nature of the Holy Spirit we may miss the fact that it is present and working in and among us. The Spirit’s arrival among us was permanent. The Spirit’s role seems to be a history long highlighting of Jesus. In order not to get in the way of anyone’s ability to see Jesus as the Living Lord, the Holy Spirit seems quite content to remain about as invisible as a puff of air. The Spirit doesn’t mind if you look through its presence, even not noticing it, as long as what you are looking at through the Spirit is the Christ, Son of God. However, God’s spirit is not the only spirit present among us; there are any number of “spirits” that we can breathe in, get whipped up by and therefore be shaped by. But whereas some spirits can consume our lives, only God’s Holy Spirit will finally bring us true life. When God’s Spirit comes down and fills us, we find a purpose, a clarity of vision and a spark of life that will not and cannot come from anywhere else. All creation began when the Spirit of God blew over the waters of chaos. The creation of humanity in the image of God was completed when God’s Spirit breathed into the first man’s nostrils. The re-creation of humanity into the image of Christ likewise requires the encounter with the breath of God through the Holy Spirit. Within

our passage from John's gospel today we find this promise from Jesus to his disciples: "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does the works. If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you." As we considered last week, on this occasion Jesus prayed for all the disciples who would follow him beyond those there; he interceded for them and us...was our Advocate and still is. The role of the Advocate in our lives is to strengthen and empower to live into the vision of being new creatures who live according to the ways of God's kingdom; ways of caring, loving and tending all others; ignoring or tearing down walls which those other "spirits" have led us to build between ourselves and others. The coming of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit into our lives is meant to be a constant reminder of whose we are and what that means for the life we live. So whether we imagine a flame or a dove, we need to constantly look for where and how the breath which comes from God is leading us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.