

“Images of the Spirit”
Acts 2:1-21
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
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If you were asked to draw a picture of the Spirit, what would you draw? It is a daunting challenge, like being asked to draw a picture of God. With Jesus, at least we have some idea of what a first-century Middle Eastern man might look like – not the guy pictured on Sunday School walls with blue eyes, blond hair parted in the middle, and a well-groomed beard! But we have some idea. How do we picture the mysterious, the invisible, the almost unknowable?

In his book *Uh-Oh* Robert Fulghum says that when he visits kindergarten students and asks them if they can do anything like sing, dance, or draw, almost all their hands go up (p. 226). Of course, they can sing or draw anything! But when he visits college students, only a few hands go up, and they have qualifications like — I only sing in the shower, I only dance to Rock and Roll, I only draw horses. As we grow older, we become more cautious, self-aware, and fearful that we may get it wrong. So, most of us would hesitate to draw a picture of the Spirit.

And yet, we have some image in our minds, some idea, no matter how vague or imprecise, and no matter how uncertain we may be of it. In fact, we may have multiple images, and these images shape our understanding and experience. So, there is value in reflecting on these images and what informs them, and Pentecost is a great time to do so.

It is not when the Spirit is born. The Spirit first shows up in scripture in the first chapter of the first book. According to Genesis, the Spirit is present at creation! But something new is happening on this great Jewish feast day to deepen its meaning and enlarge our vision. What might this day tell us about who the Spirit is and what images deepen our understanding and experience?

One image we find in scripture is that of a dove. While describing Jesus’ baptism, all four canonical Gospels refer to the Spirit descending

on him like a dove. It's why we have a descending dove on our Pentecost stoles, though I must note that when we came to Raleigh, the doves on some of our red stoles were ascending... wayward birds or Baptists and liturgy... but we Baptists, with Warren's vision, shaped a beautiful bit of worship movement earlier in the service, didn't we? My assistant, Jennie, thought Emily was going to be the dove — dressed in white, wearing feathers, and perhaps flying... perhaps next year!

Anyway, the dove is a biblical image of the Spirit. LaCount Anderson is one adult here who was willing to draw this image. We are grateful for his willingness to share his artistic gifts, today with the drawing you see on the front of the worship order. Looking at this image gives you a gentle and peaceful feeling and this is the intent, this is part of what the dove symbolizes. It also symbolizes hope. We recall that Noah sent out a dove, and when the dove returned with an olive branch, he knew the flood waters were receding. A dove can also point to love. And in truth, the Spirit embodies all of this.

The Spirit in scripture is a comforter and an advocate. The Greek word is *paraclete*, which means “one who is called to come alongside someone else.” That is who the Spirit is, the one who is with us, the one who intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words when we don't know how to pray, the one Jesus breathes on his first disciples as he offers them a word of peace in our reading from John 20. The Spirit of God is as near to us as the beating of our heart, as near as the next breath we take, within us, even though we may not always realize this.

There is a wonderful image of the Spirit in C. S. Lewis' *The Horse and His Boy*, the third *Chronicle of Narnia* (p. 158f). In a chapter entitled “The Unwelcome Fellow Traveler” a boy named Shasta learns the true identity of the Lion who has helped him. It is Aslan, a Christ figure in the series, but in this chapter Aslan's identity is concealed for a time. As the boy anxiously walks through a mountainous region, a thick fog sets in. To heighten his anxiety, he senses the presence of another but knows not whether the other is friendly or hostile.

“Who are you?” asks the boy in a frightened whisper. “One who has waited long for you,” says a voice, not loud but strong and deep. “Are you — are you a giant?” asks the boy. “You might call me a

giant,” says the Large Voice, “But I am not like the creatures you call giants.” “You’re not something dead, are you?” says the boy, “O please go away... What harm have I done to you?” The boy feels the warm breath of the Other and the Voice says, “There... That is not the breath of a ghost... Tell me your sorrows.” So, he does and learns the Other is Aslan, the King of Kings, the one who has helped him all along his journey in ways he did not realize until now, the one who walked beside him through the fog, making certain he did not fall off a steep ledge.

That is who the Spirit is, the part of God who is somehow mysteriously with us always, not to frighten us, but to give us a deep-down sense of peace. The Spirit is the one who calms us when we are in a hospital room awaiting a diagnosis, when we are at a bedside waiting on death, whenever our teenager starts the engine of a car. The Spirit is like a dove who comes not so much “down” because God isn’t just up there, but into us like a breath bringing peace and hope.

But the dove is not the only image we find for the Spirit in scripture. In the familiar reading from Acts 2, the coming of the Spirit is also like fire. Divided tongues, as of fire, the text says, appear among the disciples and enable them to proclaim the good news in a way that people from different lands who speak different languages understand.

We often think of fire as a destructive force, but it can also be life-giving. Discovering the uses of fire marked a major step forward in the history of our species. Before the advent of homes with HVAC systems, fire warmed people on cold nights. The refiner’s fire helps form precious metals and separates out impurities. To say that the Spirit is like fire, therefore, is not meant to be threatening. But it is a heads-up because fire changes things, as does the Spirit.

In contrast to the dove imagery, with this image we think not of gentleness and peace, but of courage and strength, passion and conviction, the capacity to speak out for others and God, the will and the giftedness to act in ways that benefit others. In the reading from 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul says the Spirit is the one who provides the rich diversity of gifts we have in the church, all to be used for the common good. The Spirit makes possible what would otherwise not be.

This includes many possibilities, but in Acts 2, the fire-like Spirit accomplishes a couple things. To begin with, diverse people are brought together, people from different regions and countries, people who speak different languages and have different beliefs. The Spirit makes of them one new community connected by the common story of Jesus they are able to hear because of the Spirit. But bringing diverse people together remains a challenge to this day, even in the church.

I will never forget a question a man asked during an Encore class Dr. Harshaw and I taught on race and the church. Why are Muslims able to transcend racial differences while Christians, for the most part, are not? It is an unsettling question which points to an embarrassing truth. We allow an array of differences, especially race, to divide us, when both the Gospel and the Spirit call us to transcend our differences.

Another thing the Spirit makes possible in the reading from Acts is the full participation of all in the sacred community. “In the last days it will be, God declares,” says the text, “that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”

It’s not just that *all* people will be welcomed, but that *all* people will have prophetic voice. This squares with the Apostle Paul’s claim in the reading from 1 Corinthians that in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and we were made to drink of one Spirit. In the church, everyone participates fully. We might think this is a distinctively Christian perspective, but Acts’ words about equality are a quote from Joel. This is an ancient Jewish vision that finds some level of fulfillment in Christian experience.

I say “some level” because we still have not fully realized this vision. In many contexts, women’s voices are silenced. In others, the very young and very old have little voice. In much of this nation, others have little or no voice because of their ethnicity, national origin, identity, etc. God’s Spirit is poured out on all, and when that happens, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” But we have to embrace the universal gift of the Spirit to experience this sacred reality.

So, our tradition envisions the Spirit as dove and fire, and it envisions the Spirit as wind. In Acts 2, when the Spirit comes in full, there comes from heaven a sound like the rush of a violent wind. We recall that in John 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus that the Spirit is like the wind. We don't know where it comes from or where it goes, but it is a powerful force. The Spirit is mysterious yet powerful.

I did a science project in high school that studied the effect of wind on water. Many forces shape the movement of water, but wind has a significant impact even though you cannot see it. You can only see its effects — in ripples, waves, and more. The Spirit of God is like this — mysterious yet powerful, not visible yet leaving profound effects on us.

We are consumed by grief and ready to give up... until one day hope returns and we feel like we can breathe again. We are paralyzed by a difficult decision and have no idea what to do... until in a moment we have clarity and find a way forward. We experience conflict and division and there is no path to healing... until somehow an opening appears with some simple word or action and we are reconciled.

How do these seemingly impossible things happen? Who knows for sure? Human actions matter, but often the Spirit of God is at work for healing and hope. The wind of life is breathing in us, whether we realize it or not. The Spirit of God, a gentle dove and transformative fire, is also a mysterious and powerful wind.

No single image can capture the Spirit's nature. In fact, the Spirit is more than we can ever imagine. But these images of a dove, fire, and wind are central to our understanding. And no matter how we picture the Spirit, we long for the Spirit to come. As the hymn text says:

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.

Come, Holy Spirit, come!