

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ**  
**Sunday, May 8, 2022**  
**The Rev Dr Scott Couper**

**“Descending *Columbidae*”**  
**Christian Scripture: John 1:29-34**

**Third of five sermons in a series entitled**  
**“Christian Symbols: Signposts of Devotion”**



Symbols are meaning-makers. And humans crave to make meaning. We strive to make meaning because we want to communicate. And humans want to communicate because we are relational. We need symbols to make meaning, to communicate, and thus to be in relationship.

So, let's communicate this morning. In this sermon series on Christian symbols, we seek to deepen our relationship with one another and with God by understanding several prominent symbols of our faith. We began with the Hand of God as a symbol of the Creator (the Father). Last week, we learned about *Chi Rho*

as a symbol of the Christ (in part, the Son). Today, we will learn about the dove (the descending dove) as a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

Again, I am thrilled to find that we have the symbol of the dove displayed beautifully in one of our church's stained-glass windows (in the foyer, on the left side, as you exit). I am pleased to see the dove in our church because it is as if you all already know the spiritual truths of our faith and my only task is simply to remind you.

"It is a rare thing when all four of the Gospels describe the same event. It is even rarer when they describe the same event in similar words. However, in reporting the Holy Spirit's descent upon Jesus, all four say that it came 'as' or 'like' a dove from heaven (Matthew 3:16, Mark 1:10, Luke 3:22, and John 1:32). Thus the dove has come to be the most widely recognized symbol of the Holy Spirit."<sup>1</sup> Thus this third message helps us complete a Trinitarian focus of our series thus far (Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer).

I have not read anything in the Hebrew testament that specifically links the dove as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Nonetheless, I strongly suspect that the dove in the Christian testament is inspired by the doves and pigeons in the Hebrew testament that were regularly sacrificed at the Temple (Leviticus 12:6, 15:14 and 29-30 and Numbers 6:10). Scientifically, there is no difference between

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<sup>1</sup> Ratha Doyle McGee, *Symbols: Signposts of Devotion* (Nashville, Tennessee: The Upper Room, 1962), 45.

doves and pigeons; they both belong to the same family of birds: *Columbidae*. Yet, doves are often considered smaller, whereas pigeons are larger. Also, pigeons have a straighter tail, whereas doves' tails fan out.<sup>2</sup> Doves and pigeons were often sacrificed as a substitute for expensive livestock that few people of the ancient Levant could afford (Leviticus 5:7, 12:8, 14:21-22). Because so many were poor, one can assume that “doves or pigeons were readily available and cheap” and could even be raised in people's homes.<sup>3</sup>

I suspect that the shift from ‘doves for sacrifice’ to ‘doves being manifestations of the divine’ marks a profound theological shift from an understanding that we were to **materially give to** the divine to one whereby we **spiritually receive from** the divine that which the divine freely gives. So, just as the sacrificed lamb in the Hebrew testament became the freely given Jesus in the Christian testament, so the dove sacrificed to God in the Hebrew testament became the freely given Holy Spirit in the Christian testament. That doves and

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<sup>2</sup> Hannah Ward, “Pigeon vs Dove: Two Key Differences Explained”, *A-Z Animals*, May 3, 2022. Found at: <https://a-z-animals.com/blog/pigeon-vs-dove-2-key-differences-explained/#:~:text=While%20doves%20and%20pigeons%20come,difference%20between%20doves%20and%20pigeons.>, accessed May 8, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Edwin Firmage, “Zoology (Fauna)”, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Volume 6, Si-Z), ed. David Noel Freedman (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992, 1,144.

pigeons “represent mourning innocence, powerlessness, meekness, and humility” reinforces my hypothesis.<sup>4</sup>

One can possibly trace the theological shift from the Hebrew to the Christian testament in the dove’s ‘DNA’, so to speak. You see a common denominator in the Hebrew testament’s ‘doves for sacrifice’ and the Christian testament’s ‘dove of the Holy Spirit’ in that the birds had to be ‘pure’. ‘Pure’ in the Hebrew scripture sense was to mean without blemish, spotless, clean, without fault, and perfect.

Friends, as I said last week, I believe we need to do some theological *deconstruction* before we do some *construction*. The concept of sacrifice and giving that which is pure, without spot or blemish, needs to be interrogated. The problem with the theological concept of ‘purity’ when it comes to the dove (or any sacrifice) is that it is often translated as a standard by which human beings place value on one other.

I am a victim of aesthetic prejudice as much as I am a perpetuator of it. As I young man, I suffered from terrible scarring acne. I was likely considered a pariah by many young women up until the time I reached my early twenties. Even today, I

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<sup>4</sup> John Ritenbaugh, “What the Bible Says about Turtledove”, from “The Offerings of Leviticus (Part Two): The Burnt Offering”, *Forerunner Commentary*, “Personal”, March-April 2003, *Bible Tools*. Found at: <https://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/topical.show/RTD/cgg/ID/553/Turtledove.htm>, accessed May 8, 2022. and <https://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Library.sr/CT/PERSONAL/k/795/the-offerings-of-leviticus-part-two-burnt-offering.htm>, accessed May 8, 2022.

cover my face with hair so as to hide my shame of my scars. As human beings, we can be exceedingly cruel to those who are 'less than perfect'. We prejudice people who are overweight, and underweight for that matter. We judge those who suffer from hair loss, both male and female. We have a cosmetic industry that extracts billions to alter our appearance to the point of deception. (Believe me. I often do not even recognize the person standing in front of me because she resembled none of her images on the dating site.) Young women especially are groomed on Facebook and Instagram to self-loathe and thus self-harm themselves based on their image. Blacks have straightened their beautiful kinky hair and bleached their beautiful ebony skin. Parents in our own beloved church can, I am sure, tell you of days and nights when they cried and prayed to take away their children's pain caused by society's insidious quest for physical and aesthetic perfection that none of us can meet.

Friends, I am not being politically correct with my critique of the symbol of the dove that is without flaw, without blemish, without spot, *and white*. I am instead being 'theologically correct'. When this theological concept of purity is translated socially and politically it leads to white supremacy and even to people being placed in ovens. What we imagine to be a symbol of the divine, the dove, only becomes demonic when we judge and evaluate one another by our less than pure and less than perfect physical appearances.

Let us conclude this message by *constructing*. I am going to place on this dove (on poster-board) some blemishes. I am going to put some spots and scars on this dove. I am going to add some color to our dove. I believe the dove is a beautiful symbol of the Holy Spirit that blesses us each and every day with the wisdom of God. The dove is a sign of peace, of humility, of quiet power. Yet, let us not for a minute ever believe that God accepts the dove any less if it has a blemish. Do not ever believe you are any less a child of God because you are heavy, or that you are losing your hair, or that you have psoriasis, or that you are transgender, or that you have a darker hue like my daughter. Do not ever believe that you are 'less than' because of any so-called 'flaws' you might have. To believe that we must be flawless, or that we can only offer ourselves to God flawlessly, is a heresy.

Friends, the dove is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. And I promise you, the Holy Spirit comes to bless and to empower. The Holy Spirit does not come to shame us. The Holy Spirit does not to condemn, not to criticize, not to judge, and certainly not to evaluate you or me as less than perfect! May we see the dove as a genuine sign of peace that represents an unconditional acceptance of who and what we are in all our wonderful diversity. Let us disabuse ourselves that God requires our perfection. God sees us as beautiful and perfect with our blemishes, with our

scars, with our colors. God, through the dove, affirms us with our perfect imperfections.

This was the word of God. And it was preached to the people of God. And the people of God responded, "Amen".