

Dove Spotting

A Morning Message for Worship on Baptism of Christ Sunday
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

January 10, 2016

Text: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

How many of you saw a bird this morning – at home by the feeder, while you were out for a walk, on the way here in the car? [pause] What kinds of birds did you see? [pause] Do you have a favorite bird that always makes you smile when you see it? [pause] How many of you have bird feeders at home? [pause] More than one? [pause] How many of you spend more on bird seed than you're comfortable admitting in public? [pause]

My mother was certainly in that category. She always loved birds and always had bird feeders. When I was little, we had a massive one which one of my brothers built in woodshop class. It hung off the rafters of the back stoop and would be filled with birds of all sorts, especially in the winter. One of my chores when I was little was to sweep the fallen bird seed and accompanying bird dirt off the stoop so it didn't get tracked into the kitchen. The best part of that unpleasant task was seeing the littlest birds finally have their chance to eat the fallen seed, our own bird ecosystem!

My mom set up one of her bird ecosystems at every home she ever had. In the last home they ever occupied together, my parents set up their recliners in the living room to offer them maximum viewing of the array of birdfeeders my dad had

mounted at the far end of the deck. They bought birdseed in 20 pound bags from the local Agway and their birds ate well indeed! They also provided my parents with much needed distractions as dad's health declined and life became more challenging. One of my dad's greatest pleasures in the last weeks of his life was watching those birds. Then, after his death, those same birds and the generations that followed them at her feeders kept my mom company until she finally had to leave them to come and live with me. She had been with us for less than a week when a bird feeder was set up in our back yard, and one has been there ever since.

Birds and bird-watching have been a part of my life in one way or another for all of my life. I do keep the feeder filled, but not as consistently as my mother would have, I admit. When I do, I love watching the cardinals, their brilliant reds impossible to miss especially in winter. I also enjoy the blue jays even though my mother always chased them away from her feeders. I admire their determination in figuring out how to get seed from my feeder for which they are too big. They quickly figured out that they could attempt to perch and then kick off hard with their feet, sending a swath of seed falling to the ground underneath for their dining pleasure. That kind of ingenuity wins points with me even though my mother thought they were the bullies of the bird world.

Another favorite of mine are the mourning doves. While I never see them at the feeder, they are often close by, nestled in the

dirt at its base. These doves usually have a mate who is seldom far away, and I like that. But, I confess, the birds I really love – the ones that I am always looking for and am always so excited to see – are the raptors! Falcons, ospreys, redtail hawks – we have them all in this area and I never tire of spotting them on my walks and on my drive down here from Providence. They are especially easy to see this time of year when there is no leaf cover to hide behind. Soaring and wheeling up through the cloudless sky, they often call to mind the psalmist's verse of rising up on eagle's wings carried by the Spirit of God to new heights.

Perhaps this is why I am so drawn in this morning's well-known story about the baptism of Christ to the image of the Spirit descending "like a dove" on Jesus as he rose up out of the Jordan. Can't you just feel the power of that moment? Jesus, water dripping from his eyebrows and face, rivulets coursing down his face and neck from his sodden hair. And in that exact moment, something miraculous and powerful happens when out of nowhere a snow white dove slowly descends toward Jesus. The very air is quivering with expectation as God's own self makes known that this is God's own son, the Beloved and in him God is well pleased. Time freezes for an instant in this holy, sacred, spectacular moment. And then, it was over leaving everyone to wonder what had just happened.

I think we are drawn to the dove in this story because it's a powerful link between our world, our lives and the world in which Jesus lived. We've seen doves whether its mourning doves in the backyard or white doves released on some special occasion. We've watched them fly off into the sky, circling ever higher, secretly wondering what it would be like to soar above the world like they do. That's why the dove as an ancient and universal symbol of the Holy Spirit of God makes so much sense to us. Yes, of course, God's Spirit would appear like a dove! How perfect! A pure white dove linking heaven and earth, linking our mundane lives with God's own self. What better symbol from Creation could God have chosen for this role?

So, the dove's appearance in such dramatic fashion at Jesus' baptism is really no surprise. Through Jesus, God is renewing His promise of new life always possible, of peace in the midst of turbulent times, of God's never ending love for His beloved people. But, does that mean the dove is essentially just a prop in this story? Is the dove only a set piece, there to recall for the people the story of God's promise to Noah? Or was it to remind them of the white dove as the ultimate sacrifice one could offer to God in the Temple, foreshadowing that Jesus would ultimately pay a heavy price for receiving God's Spirit into his life so completely in this moment? Both of these dove connections to the story are real and important, but is there, could there, be more to

it even than that? Could the dove also represent an opportunity for us to participate in the mission and ministry God placed before Jesus in that moment? If so, how are we to respond to such a formidable invitation? What does this story with its descending dove mean for us, right here and right now?

Perhaps it's an invitation from God to engage in some active bird watching in our own lives. Now, as soon as I said that, at least one of you thought, "bird watching? Is she nuts?" Perhaps, but bear with me as I explain my thinking. I've been doing some reading on bird-watching and I've learned some things I didn't know before. For example, there is a subtle but distinct difference between bird watching and birding. Bird watching is what folks like me are doing as we watch birds come to the feeder or take note of their antics while we're in our yards or out for a walk. Birding, on the other hand, is a much more serious activity involving learning about the birds and their habitats, becoming experienced in identifying them as much by their songs as their appearances. Birding often involves traveling to locations, often great distances, just to watch and often wait long periods of time for the chance to observe a particular bird.

So, now that we have a basic understanding of the nuances of bird-watching, what am I suggesting we should be doing with the descending dove at Jesus' baptism in mind? Well, if we accept that the dove is the conveyor of God's Spirit to empower Jesus and

us for all that God needs to be done, then doesn't it make sense that we should be watching for all those descending doves in the world around us each day? Shouldn't we, in other words, be on the lookout for all those places where God's Spirit, God's plans for us and for our church and for the other people we encounter each day is trying to break in so that perhaps we can help it along? Dear friends, if we believe that God's Spirit is always with us, always waiting to guide and empower us, equip and enable us, then shouldn't we always be watching for those moments when it is ready to break through in real, tangible ways? Of course we should! But what does that mean? What would that look like?

Well, quite simply, that depends on you and what you are willing to do in response to God's presence felt in your life. Put another way, are you just a casual bird watcher or a more committed birder? That is up to you and you can begin by pondering a simple question. Is there something nagging at you that you keep trying to brush off because there's just no time or energy? Oh, I should go and visit so and so but I have so much to do today. Oh, I should find the time to read my bible more, to attend church more, to learn more about prayer, to understand more about what's happening in the world, but I'm already so busy. Sound familiar? Of course it does! We all feel that way. Life is too busy, too challenging, too anxiety producing to add one more thing! And yet that might be what God is asking you to do.

This is where the whole bird watching – dove spotting metaphor – comes in. You have to be watching for those God moments in order to respond to them. You have to be attentive to them if you are going to be able to recognize them for what they are. They are not just one more thing to be added to your already too long to do list. Those God moments are really God's own testimony of how much God loves you, how pleased God is with *you!* It is in these rare and fleeting moments when you know you are beloved just as you are by God beyond all reason and as a result you just *know* God has need of you in some special way that only you can respond to. You *know* you are the beloved in whom God is well pleased and knowing that, you are changed forever.

Now that kind of dove spotting is tricky and challenging. More like birding than simple bird-watching. It requires diligence and faithfulness and trust – mostly trust – that God doesn't make mistakes, even about you. When God nudges you with an invitation to do something, my advice is to take the time to ponder it carefully. Ask yourself, is God doing the nudging or is it something/someone else? Up to you to figure out, I'm afraid. And the best way, the only way, to do that is through prayer and simple patience. If God really needs you to do something, I promise that invitation will not go away. It will keep fluttering up in your face. It will keep pecking you on the back or perching just outside the door of your heart. How you answer that invitation is

totally up to you, always. But never forget that your response to whatever dove spotting situation you find yourself in is your answer to God. In that moment, you are encountering God and God's plans for you, God's need of you, and it is to God's own self that you respond. And remember that whatever dove spotting endeavor God approaches you with, it is most likely not some grand and glorious task like the one bestowed on Jesus. God does not expect you or anyone else to be Jesus. God expects you to be you, just as you are, with open hands and heart ready to respond as you are able, when you are able. These dove-spotting moments are often every day moments, often so very small, they are easy to miss. Like the house sparrows hiding in the branches waiting for their turn at the feeder. Like the mourning dove nestled in the bushes awaiting her mate's return, confident he'll be back.

So, dear friends, be vigilant in your dove spotting. Don't settle for simple bird watching as you look for your dove moments from God. Instead be the confident birder as you look intently for God's movement, God's invitations in your life. Watch for God in the glorious colors of the winter's dawn. Listen for God's voice in the music of the spheres all around you. Respond to God's movement in your life as your situation in the moment makes possible, knowing that always, always, always God's response to you will be – "You are my beloved and in you I am well pleased." Let it be so, God. Amen.