

Today's passage opens with an ark full of the Earth's creatures and one big extended human family, all confined together within, while storms of unimaginable strength ravage the earth. Multiple sources contribute to what we call Genesis today, so there is some discrepancy concerning passage of time. There are verses that describe storms lasting one hundred and fifty days, other verses that say they lasted forty. Throughout this passage, there are conflicting reports: Did the flood and then the abatement of the flood last forty days and forty nights? Or did the flood last one hundred and fifty days, with the abatement of the water taking several more months?

Regardless of the specifics, many days of flooding and wind have come to pass, until God remembered the ark and its inhabitants, and God's next move was to blow a breath of wind-- the Spirit-- across Earth. With this breath, flood waters were halted, the rain stopped falling from the heavens, and water began and continued to recede from the land. As the water pulled back, the ark came to rest on top of a mountain range. Eventually, the flood water receded enough that the tops of the mountains can be seen.

At this point, Noah opens a window of the ark and releases a raven. It flies back and forth, away from the ark and back to the ark. Noah must deem this behavior inconclusive, because next he sends a dove to see if the ground is dried up. The dove returns to Noah and the ark because she has found no place to land, an indication that water still covers the face of the earth. Noah brings the dove back into the ark for seven days before sending her out a second time. On her second trip, the dove returns by evening-- this time bringing back a freshly picked olive leaf. The olive leaf gives Noah a clue to determine the state of the Earth. Because of this small gift from the dove, Noah now knows that the water has receded from the Earth. He waits

for seven more days, then sends the dove out for a third time. This time, she does not return to him. Eventually, God speaks to Noah, and instructs him to finally leave the ark with his family and all of the animals.

The most famous bird in this story is called a dove in the Bible, but according to Debbie Blue in her book *Consider the Birds*, the bird that Noah sent from his ark was not the same bird that we call a dove today. Noah's bird was mostly likely a rock dove, a grey bird with a purple and green iridescent neck. We now know it by a different name-- pigeon.

Doves and pigeons are from the same scientific family, Columbidae. The words dove and pigeon have roots in different languages and regions, but are used in reference to the same bird. Over time, we have come to call the smaller, whiter birds in the family doves, and the larger, darker birds pigeons.¹ But a dove is a pigeon. A dove is really the same bird that seems to be everywhere, crawling all over today's city streets, begging for scraps of picnics in the park, and in general only seems to foster annoyance.

When you picture the story of Noah's ark, imagine a pigeon. In the verses from Isaiah talking about grief and hopelessness, it is the pigeon that stands as the metaphor for grief. In Jesus' baptism, the Wind of God descends on Jesus in the form of a dove. That bird is most likely the same common grey pigeon with an iridescent neck. This annoying, dirty, ordinary bird manages to show up in multiple stories where we see God's faithfulness, God's love, and God's work in the world.

The birds in our text today may feel like a small detail. After all, the story of Noah, God, the ark, and the flood spans four chapters, and the journey of the raven and dove is but six verses.

¹ Chapter 1, *Consider the Birds* by Debbie Blue

But, the birds are important. In fact, the flight of the birds appear not only in the Bible, but also as a key detail in a parallel story in the ancient Mesopotamian poem the Epic of Gilgamesh.² It is in particularities, such as the use of birds in both Genesis and other ancient stories from the Mesopotamian region, that invite us to learn more. It is often in the details we assume insignificant that we find the disruptive power of God revealed.³ The doves are owed consideration. As Job says in chapter 12, verses 7-9, “But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?” Job may have had a completely different context, but his words can challenge us to look deeper, to learn from not just the humans but the birds of these stories.

This saga of God, Noah, and the flood leaves many details to the imagination. We don’t have a lot of information about what the family’s experience or daily life on the ark was like. But we can imagine that the chaos of the flood outside may be comparable to the chaos within the ark, within Noah, within each of his family members.

We also don’t know about the flights of the pigeon. We know that the rain had stopped and the flood waters were receding, but we don’t know what kind of state the Earth was in. The bird probably flew over all kinds of destruction, including bent trees, snapped branches, rock slides, natural and perhaps even man made debris. The flight of the pigeon may have been difficult due to wind that had not quite abated. Perhaps even securing that olive leaf in her beak was a challenge. Yet the pigeon withstood all the dirt, destruction, and adversity to return to Noah twice.

² Genesis by Bill T. Arnold & https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epic_of_Gilgamesh

³ Suella Gerber

“Pigeons want to be close to us,” writes Debbie Blue. “They are where we are-- in some of the worst places we have made (our neglected projects and abandoned buildings) and some of the best. They won’t leave us alone.”⁴ The pigeon in our story braved the post storm environment, not once but three times to do her work. Just like pigeons, God wants to be close to us. God is in our arks and on our debris ridden shores. God is in our worst places, our best places, and in every shade of grey no man’s land in between.

In other books of the Bible, poets use pigeons stand metaphors for grief. Isaiah 38:14 says, “Like a swallow or a crane I clamor, I moan like a pigeon. My eyes are weary with looking upward. O Lord, I am oppressed; be my security!” Isaiah 59:11 says, “We all growl like bears; like pigeons we moan mournfully. We wait for justice, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us.” In both of these passages, we are reading the work of clearly distraught authors. In the first passage, the sick and suffering King Hezekiah uses the moaning pigeon as a metaphor for pain. The king is tired, oppressed, sick, worn down. If we continued reading, we would find the passage ending on a note of more hope. In the second verse, the moaning pigeon is again compared to the grief of the human author, who is in a period of waiting and longing.

Once again, the pigeon-- or the dove-- has appeared alongside a human being in the messiness of daily life, who is experiencing all sorts of personal chaos. The people in these passages are waiting, hoping, longing, crying, working, succeeding, failing-- in short, living. And once more, God is present in these same stories, working and loving. But God isn’t done using a pigeon.

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Jesus's baptism becomes another kind of flood story.⁵ Matthew 3:16-17 says, "When Jesus had been baptized he went up immediately out of the water, and the heavens opened and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and alighting on him. Then came a voice from heaven saying, 'This is my Son, the Beloved One, with whom I am well pleased.'"⁶ God has descended in the form of a pigeon, again showing God's presence with us. In these passages with pigeons, we see God at work. We see humans experiencing God's love and faithfulness. We are reminded that God shows up in our everyday lives, in ways we may not expect.

Speaking of unexpected, let's talk about pop culture. Perhaps the most widely known pigeon appearance in pop culture is in the classic Disney film *Mary Poppins*. In several scenes, an old woman sits on the steps of a bank, selling bags of bread crumbs for two pence to anyone who will buy. She wants the pigeons which surround her on the steps to be fed, and their young to be well cared for. The famous song, "Feed the Birds" acts as the woman's voice, representing her perspective. At one point in the film, Mary Poppins sings the song to the children in her care, Jane and Michael Banks. She shares with them the story and mission of the Bird Woman. In the book, *Mary Poppins* even allows the children to buy bread crumbs from the Bird Woman and take the time to feed the pigeons on the steps. In a later scene in the movie, we see Jane and Michael leaving the bank with their father Mr. Banks. He ushers them away from the Bird Woman, not allowing them to buy crumbs and discouraging them from wandering close to the pigeons.

⁵ Thanks to Suella Gerber for helping me make this connection.

⁶ The Anchor Bible Commentary, W.F. Albright and C.S. Mann

The song, “Feed the Birds” came to be one of Walt Disney’s favorite songs. The brothers who wrote the song, Richard and Robert Sherman, have said that Walt Disney found the theme of this song to be the theme for the Mary Poppins story: giving to others.⁷

Pigeons showed up in this small plotline, this story within a story, which conveys the metaphor for the entire film. Pigeons are there as the Bird Woman, the Banks family, and Mary Poppins go about their lives. Perhaps, like most of us, the father finds the pigeons to be dirty nuisances, and he does his best to ignore them, kicking the pigeons out of his way as he walks down the sidewalk. Yet, the pigeons carry the message that Mr. Banks needed to learn-- the importance of giving time, love, and attention to his family. The pigeons are not the point, but they are present, directing us along the way to truth. In Mary Poppins, the truth is the importance of giving.

We can accept the challenge of discovering multiple truths in our own pigeon stories. The truth that these biblical stories reveal is that God is present and faithful in the lives of Noah and his family. God is present and faithful in the life of Hezekiah. The truth is God is present and faithful in our own stories.

Author Rachel Held Evans writes, “The Spirit is like wind, like fire, like a bird, like a breath-- moving through every language and every culture of this world, bursting out of every category and defying every metaphor. Who’s to say where She will travel next?”⁸

May we see the work of the Spirit as it travels through narratives of ruination and creation, of oppression and justice, of baptisms then and to come, of our lives. May we have the ability to recognize the very breath of God blowing new life into this world, and the courage to

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feed_the_Birds

⁸ Page 200

call out the good news. May we notice the pigeons, the birds, the plants, and the animals that point us towards truth. In our everyday lives, whether in the tangle of humanness or the wake of destruction, may we learn again and again of God's presence with us.