

Animal Sunday (25Sept16)

Job39:1-12,126-30;

Psalm104:14-23,31;

1Corinthians1:10-23;

LuKe12:5-6,22-31

For a couple decades, Dave Rhoads, an emeritus professor from the Chicago seminary, has been among the most important inventors and instigators for this ecological edge in Lutheran churches. (He's also a friend of Joyce Anderson's from her church in Racine.)

Fitting this Animal Sunday, Dave tells of a dream where he was going to receive communion and found himself next to a snake, and then a person next in line, and then a raccoon with its paws extended, then a bird at communion eating bread crumbs.*

Perhaps that's an image to keep in mind for this day, and is among the reasons we ourselves are receiving communion each Sunday of this season, even without bears and turtles lined up with us, still a reminder that we are in communion with all creation—not just with wheat and grape, but with pollinators and soil microbes and deer along the roadsides that lead to markets and grazing blackbirds and sunshine and rain and so much more.

But if you're still feeling that we're a mainly human contingent gathered in church this morning, then you may yet turn your faithful attention to the words we have from Psalm 104. This is no Isaian (65:25) "peaceable kingdom," where the wolf lays down with the lamb and the lion eats straw like an ox. No, in Psalm 104 the lion still eats ox like a lion. Those young lions lurk and prowl at night to find their food, food given to them by God, just as the grass is given for cattle and grain for us. It may not be a utopian dream in Psalm 104, but it very much is a faithful "topian" vision. It's not a "utopia" (literally meaning "no place" or "not a place") but is firmly rooted in place, in the actual topography of our lives amid this world. With

that, the Psalm sees God not only as some distant goal, but as fully engaged and caring about these different and disagreeing creatures here and now. So the lions still get to be carnivores. And humans get wine. (Though, for full disclosure we're not the only ones who enjoy alcohol; cedar waxwings eat fruit that has hung on trees too long and fermented, until they can even get so tipsy they can't quite fly on course. Though it's not that birds need a DUI patrolling squad car—an absurd notion, but which we'll reflect on more later.)

Anyway, just as we heard in another beautiful and expansive selection in Job that portrays members of creation far from humans, Psalm 104 also nicely attends to distinct habitats as blessing from God for biodiversity, the varieties of life. God grows trees for birds. God created night for nocturnal animals. From our Darwinian understanding of natural selection we may question which direction this actually proceeds, but nevertheless Psalm 104 is onto something in its attention to specific habitats with the thriving of species.

Among that, I especially have been enjoying what we read from verse 18, "the stony cliffs are a refuge for the badgers." Instead of "badger," other translations use the odd animal terms "coney" or "hyrax." So I sent a note this week to one of my Old Testament professors, Diane Jacobson, who worked on this translation for our hymnals. Since it relates to our own shared habitat, I asked her, "can the Wisconsin Badger fans amid my congregation claim blessing with the appearance of these badgers?" She replied that was, "remarkably insightful and clearly part of original authorial intent." So there you have it, a special divine nod to Bucky.

Whether it's as playful as that or not, I also love Diane's translation in verse 22, where the night ends and the sun rises and, as she phrases it, the lions "*lay themselves down*" in their dens. It seems a poetic reflection of that old bedtime

* <http://www.letallcreationpraise.org/worship-services/blessing-of-the-animals/blessing-of-all-the-animals-a-sermon>

prayer, "now I *lay me down* to sleep." Though we're awake at different times and eat different things and rest in different places, still the echo in that verse ties our lives to the lives of lions, refusing to let them be too separate from us. We can see other animals as our siblings, as part of this vast family.

But that may confront us with the Gospel reading, which seems to play family favorites. Last week I'd said that our God doesn't care "exclusively or maybe even mostly about humans." This would seem to be yet another example of why I should read ahead to the next week's lesson and actually pay attention to what Jesus says before I open my big mouth. Or maybe it's an example of the interplay of Scripture, how it doesn't all say the same exact thing, but does disagree or is in situational dialogue with itself. So last week's readings portrayed God's delight in cavorting with Leviathan the sea monster, though it was harmful to humans. But today Jesus promises that "you are of more value than many sparrows" or flowers of the field or ravens. One reading seems to say humans are just one among many, amid the mix of this grand family of creatures, and the other says you are most valuable.

So what would make Jesus say we are more highly valued by God than sparrows? We certainly can't say you're cuter than a tiger cub or more precious than pandas. It may be claimed that, just as we feel special kinship looking into the face of a chimpanzee, that we're valued because we are more like God, though I'm particularly reluctant to make that argument. Indeed, as categories of creature or Creator, we'd have to confess we're more like chinchillas or alligators or poinsettia plants or moon rocks than like God.

Instead, might the value be by body mass, that big creatures get more attention than little ones? That's often our human tendency, to count and notice the plight of megafauna like

elephants or polar bears or whales, but to be less invested in smaller creatures.

Or maybe lifespan gives us more value, where mayflies only last for a day, or rabbits breed three times per year and are mature at four months old, or why Jesus mentions sparrows, that typically live only to 4 years or so in the wild, just as Aldo Leopold noticed chickadee mortality rates were more than 50% after a single winter.

Or maybe another factor in our value and associated with our lifespan is our place in the food chain, that it takes a lot of mosquitoes to feed one bat, or rabbits to feed a hawk, that there are fewer snakes than mice and fewer mice than grasshoppers. Or in your case, that it takes a lot of salmon, who ate even more herring or crayfish, which had to eat scads of larvae or plankton.

To try on a completely different version, though, of why God would value us differently than lilies or sparrows, it might be because of what we're capable of, or what our potential is. This is true in both negative and positive ways. To return to the absurd drunk flying cedar waxwings, they don't need police to pull them over for imbibing too much fermented fruit because they won't do much harm that way, whereas we need laws about drinking and driving because we are all too liable to harm others.

Or, in an apparently more benign perspective, what we cause in getting this bread and wine here today may be terribly destructive. That process may be destroying other life and interrupting cycles of well-being and altering the habitats that other animals depend on. Fields may be covered in pesticides and insecticides that help our grain and grapes to grow, but harm other life and, we're learning, will even wreck the health of the soil. It's still a fairly new thing to think of healthy dirt. More, our roads not only bear risk for the deer standing alongside them, but also carry

vehicles that are polluting the air and changing the climate of the planet, even for those animals that live far, far away from direct human presence.

And there are those birds of the air that Jesus mentions. My life may be of more value than many sparrows (and our habits benefit house sparrows and crows and seagulls). But I wonder about trading the value of my life, what it would be not to count myself more than, for example, an extinct passenger pigeon. I wonder what I'd trade to be able to see flocks that block out the sun all day. Or to see an auk or 12 foot tall great moa of New Zealand or a Carolina parakeet that was exterminated for the benefit of making hats or an ivory-billed woodpecker that simply didn't have enough old forests.

Or if I wouldn't actually trade my life for a bird's, what *would* I sacrifice? We figured out how to make do without DDT in order for bald eagles again to soar over our Wisconsin lakes and figured it may be okay that cranes cause crop damage. But what else of my life would I change or give up for the wellbeing of another creature?

That question may be the reason we hear the assigned reading from 1st Corinthians today. There's nothing very natural or animal-ish in there, but maybe it is the guidance from Jesus that we as faithful humans have a spot in creation not only to cause harm but to ask what we may sacrifice for others (or for "otters"), following the way of the cross that doesn't try to claim my own life is more valuable for being hoarded, but finds the worth in community of God's blessing.

Perhaps that's a perspective of our value, in assessing what can go wrong, and also in figuring how to do better. We're valued because God strives so much to redeem you. Weighing whether comfort and convenience, our worries in life of what we eat or wear, that this is not worth the loss of life, I'm offering the last word to Aldo Leopold. From his speech at Wyalusing

State Park, this is for "the funeral of a species," on a monument to the passenger pigeon:

We know now what was unknown to all the preceding caravan of generations: that [humans] are only fellow-voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution. This new knowledge should have given us...a sense of kinship with fellow-creatures;...of wonder over the magnitude and duration of the biotic enterprise...

These things, I say, should have come to us. I fear they have not come to many.

*For one species to mourn the death of another is a new thing under the sun. The Cro-Magnon who slew the last mammoth thought only of steaks. The sportsman who shot the last pigeon thought only of his prowess. The sailor who clubbed the last auk thought of nothing at all. But we, who have lost our pigeons, mourn the loss. Had the funeral been ours, the pigeons would hardly have mourned us. In this fact [and this potential], rather than in [synthetic] nylon or [computers or nuclear] bombs, lies objective evidence of our superiority over the beasts.***

Rejoicing with all creation, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

A brief silence.

God of all creation, with all creation we join in praise. And as Francis of Assisi preached your word to the birds, we pray you open our ears to hear other creatures preaching you to us. We also give thanks for these favorite animals in our household or larger family of earth now (PAUSE) Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

We pray today as one among many, as one species surrounded by millions. So we think of those who are close, like the chickens and chickadees, crows, raccoons, and coyotes, and those farther away and more foreign to us, in jungles and deserts, on mountains and in the depths of seas. In all of this, we ask your blessing on these creatures and sustenance in their habitats. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

We give thanks for political movements that care for creation, for 100 years of the National Park Service, for the Endangered Species Act, the Department of Natural Resources, for nations working together on climate change,

** found in *A Sand County Almanac*

for organizations that motivate us to take up this challenge. Expand our hearts and strengthen us for sacrificial love. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

We pray for the health of creatures who are at risk, for snow leopards and orcas, rhinoceroses and manatees, for Karner blue butterflies and Kirtland's warbler, for those with too much rain—farmers, flooded homes, and the creatures around them. For all these places of concern, for animals as well as the people we worry about and which we name now, silent or aloud (PAUSE). Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Celebrating the beauty of creation's habitats, we also celebrate the beauty of these quilts that surround us today. We praise you for the blessing of hardworking and deeply caring hands that have made them, and pray for all the places around this world where people will receive them from Lutheran World Relief. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

In the promise that you chose us and, in the fullness of time, will gather all things on earth into your embrace, bring us with all creation around your throne in eternal praise. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Gather all these prayers and whatever else you see we need as we join together with these concluding words:

**Jesus Christ, teach us to empathize with Earth.
Make our spirits sensitive to the cries of creation,
for justice from the land, the seas, and the skies.
Jesus Christ, make our faith sensitive to the
longing groans of the Spirit in creation.
Jesus Christ, make our hearts sensitive to the
songs of our kin, celebrations from the sea, the
forest, and the air. Christ, teach us to care.
Amen**