



SAINT PETER'S CHURCH

Look at the Birds of the Air... and the Squirrels

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph G. Schaller
The First Sunday of Creation Season: ~ September 29, 2019
Biodiversity*

Job 28:1-11

You know that silver comes from a mine, and so is gold, before they are refined. Iron is dug from the earth, and copper must be smelted from rocks. You know that people can light up the darkest hole in search of ore. We drive shafts into hillsides in remote and uninhabited regions; we dangle and sway on ropes, deep in the ground. On its surface the earth produces bread, while underneath it's a violent cauldron of fire. Its rocks are full of sapphires and its dust contains gold— places unseen by birds of prey, even by the eyes of the falcon; places unknown to wild animals, even to the noble lion. We work over the flintiest rocks, and tear down mountains; we cut channels through granite, in our quest for precious things. We dam up streams in our drive to bring hidden treasure to sunlight.

Psalm 148

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| 1 Alleluia! Praise God from the heavens; *
sing praise in the heights. | 9 Mountains and all hills, *
fruit trees and all cedars; |
| 2 Sing praise, all you angels; *
sing praise, all the heavenly host. | 10 Wild beasts and all cattle, *
creeping things and winged birds; |
| 3 Sing praise, sun and moon; *
sing praise, all you shining stars. | 11 Rulers of the earth and all peoples, *
judges and all leaders of the world; |
| 4 Sing praise, heaven of heavens *
and you waters above the heavens. | 12 Young men and maidens, *
old and young together. |
| 5 Let them praise the Name of God, *
by whose command they were created. | 13 Let them praise your Name, O God, *
for your Name only is exalted;
your splendor is over earth and heaven. |
| 6 God made them stand fast for ever and ever, *
and gave them a law which shall not pass away. | 14 You have raised up strength for your people
and praise for all your loyal servants, *
the children of Israel, a people who are near you. Alleluia! |
| 7 Sing praise from the earth, *
you sea-monsters and all deeps; | |
| 8 Fire and hail, snow and fog, *
tempestuous wind, doing God's will; | |

1 Timothy 4:1-5

FROM PAUL, APOSTLE OF CHRIST JESUS BY THE command of God our Savior and Christ Jesus our hope, To Timothy, my true child in the faith: May grace, mercy and peace be yours from Abba God and from Jesus Christ our Savior. I repeat the request I made when I was leaving for Macedonia: stay on at Ephesus, and insist that certain people stop teaching false doctrines and cease devoting themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These things promote endless speculations rather than God's providential work—which is revealed by faith. The purpose of this instruction is love from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and a sincere faith.

Matthew 6:25-33

That's why I tell you not to worry about your livelihood, what you are to eat or drink or use for clothing. Isn't life more than just food? Isn't the body more than just clothes? "Look at the birds in the sky. They don't sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet our God in heaven feeds them. Aren't you more important than they? Which of you by worrying can add a moment to your lifespan? And why be anxious about clothing? Learn a lesson from the way the wildflowers grow. They don't work; they don't spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in full splendor was arrayed like one of these. If God can clothe in such splendor the grasses of the field, which bloom today and are thrown on the fire tomorrow, won't God do so much more for you—you who have so little faith? "Stop worrying, then, over questions such as, 'What are we to eat,' or 'what are we to drink,' or 'what are we to wear?' Those without

faith are always running after these things. God knows everything you need. Seek first God's reign, and God's justice, and all these things will be given to you besides.

Part of my morning ritual—at least on the days I can get to it—involves sitting on the deck off of our bedroom, listening to classical music on my airpods, and taking in the world in the morning light. I particularly enjoy watching the squirrels, climbing up and down the trees, and racing along the electrical and cable wires as if there are elevated highways. Sometimes, they just seem to be having fun, but most of the time, they seem intentional and industrious in their task of gathering food. At this time of year, they are particularly busy, gathering the stocks for the winter time of scarcity. We have a large oak tree which towers above the deck, and just about every year we have to put up with several weeks of an ongoing barrage of acorns which plummet to the ground as they are dislodged by the squirrels above. The annoyance of the intermittent banging of the acorns on the deck and our car parked in the alley is somewhat mitigated by the awareness that this is merely a part of the natural cycle of life which sustains the wildlife and allows new growth to come forth.

There often seems to be an inevitable quality about nature, at least from our limited perspective. Season after season, in the cycle of birth and death, creation seems to tend to itself. But the natural world achieves vitality only through a certain degree of effort. It may be more difficult to appreciate the growth of a flower or a tree as being anything more than an unfolding of some kind of internal potential, which often pushes on in the face of all sorts of obstacles. We can see the effort of survival more clearly in the non-domesticated animal world, where beings spend the overwhelming percentage of their time working for survival, through the gathering of food and propagation of their species. So, with all due respect, I find the image which Jesus puts forth suggesting a care-free existence of birds, somewhat inaccurate. Birds may be beloved by God, and may often seem to be having a grand old time, but I think they are often working rather hard in the act of survival.

We live at a time in human history where we are slowly coming to an awareness of the vulnerability of the natural world. For generations, those who raise crops or rely on the availability of animals for their survival or sail the seas have been aware of the impact of weather patterns and the importance of favorable conditions for optimal outcomes. But our dawning consciousness of the precariousness of our global climate and the potential negative effects on all the earth have brought a new sobriety (among many, at least) and, unfortunately, anxiety. I'm sure most of us were shocked and disturbed by the recent revelation that the bird population in the United States and Canada has decreased by more than three billion—one in four birds—over the past 50 years. Just this week, the New York Times reported that climate warming was threatening to eliminate most of the habitats of a number of official state birds, including the Ruffed Grouse of Pennsylvania! And hardly a week goes by without another report of accelerated global warming. Add to this anxiety the outrage we may feel about those in political power and certain industries who, in the words of Paul Krugman, seem determined to “cook the earth as quickly as possible.”

And yet, might we still be able to surrender to the wonder of creation, in all of its diversity and tenacity? We might regard a beautiful, sunny day or a breathtaking landscape with a sense of poignancy, feeling the gift of the moment but also holding the awareness of the limits of the vulnerability of everything in life.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

As most of us know through our experience, one of the least effective means to try and help an anxious person is to tell them not to worry! Is Jesus merely attempting to sooth his followers as he simultaneously prepares them for some rough-going on the road ahead? Or, is he calling for a deeper form of consciousness? The paradox of living with a Christ-consciousness is that we are asked to abandon ourselves in a radical dependence on the transcendent power of God while still claiming a powerful sense of agency and responsibility for our lives. But the important thing is to be able to tell the difference between when we need to surrender and when we need to get busy.

Often, the tendency is to view the created world in a transactional frame, meaning that the earth and all of its creatures, including other human beings, are available to us to be used according to what we think we need. Sometimes this is inevitable and necessary: The farmer raises crops to feed her family and to sell so that others may eat. We rely on animals (or not) or vegetables for food. We call upon people with certain skills to repair our plumbing, restore our homes, clean up after us, or provide us with other needs. We might pray for good weather in the day of a special event. In a complex society, transactional interdependence is inevitable. In the spiritual dimension, we might well call on God to give us what we need or want. But the problem is when this runs amok.

To cite only one obvious example, our tendency to place profit and convenience over the consequences of excessive reliance on fossil fuels is but one of the factors which threatens our world.

The alternative attitude—one of surrender—offers something different. And it draws us beyond mere appreciation into a deeper relationship with what exists beyond our own sphere of consciousness. Here, it is our encounter with diversity and difference which makes the difference. Grasping the diversity of the created world should actually stun us—should leave us almost breathless in the face of what is so much beyond us—so different from us. In a similar way, the embrace of human diversity with regard to race, class, sexuality, nationality...requires more than an acknowledgement of difference or even the commitment to the idea that, deep down, we are all “merely human,” all sharing so much in common...as important as that may be. We have to allow the *otherness* of those who are, in fact, different from ourselves in some salient way. We can never fully understand the reality of others, even those who seem very similar to us. But rather than retreat into a sense of alienation, or an attitude which limits our comfort only to what we presume we fully know, appreciation of *radical* otherness allows us to commit ourselves to participation with what we cannot reduce to the merely familiar. And this invites *reverence*. By taking on the stance of *reverence* toward what is beyond us, whether it's the vastness and complexity of creation, the diversity and difference within the human community, or even the irreducible uniqueness of those we love the most, we can move from isolation toward genuine communion. That's why a stance of reverence toward the sacred, rather than create distance, opens the space of intimacy which includes the capacity to be dependent and comforted by something or someone beyond ourselves. To accept that we cannot completely control the world or other humans, who are all “wonderfully and mysteriously made.” And we will become less anxious—not that we won't continue to worry about things, but we might trust that we are a part of something greater, something diverse and beautiful, something awesome. Our capacity to be open to the transcendence of the Holy is really part of our willingness to grasp the transcendence of creation right in front of our faces.

Look at the birds of the air. But look at them with wonder. Let that wonder release us, if only for a few moments, from our anxiety about being good enough or controlling enough to ensure the security of our lives. Let our anxious isolation and sense of helplessness yield to the responsibility which comes from participation as a member of a whole universe. Let the acorns fall and the exigencies of life and death move in their natural courses, but don't abandon the conviction that our engagement with the world makes a difference. And when we are anxious and can't seem to find our bearings, may we feel held by something greater than ourselves.

The surrender and the freedom of the engagement with wonder which moves us beyond ourselves is so beautifully described in the poem by Mary Oliver, *Wild Geese*:

*You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.*