

Consider the Ravens, the Lilies and the Geese...
Reverend Ruth Martz

April 24, Earth Day Sunday
Psalm 104; Luke 12: 22-31

When Steve and I moved into our home about a year and a half ago, the owner left a feeder that I learned was for hummingbirds. And last spring, while I was filling the feeder for the first time, a hummingbird came to drink, about 6 inches from me. I couldn't believe it and gazed with awe at this wondrous little creature. A few days later, Steve called me to the window and pointed to a heron standing on a rock in the cove, my first sighting of this majestic bird. Again I watched in stillness and wonder.

And then I turned-- and grimaced as I saw the army coming, that is, a dozen geese swimming ashore and scattering through our yard to feed--and to leave their abundant offerings, which Steve had been cleaning up every few days. This time, I ran out, clapping my hands and yelling—Go! Go! The geese looked at me as if I were crazy and began to walk very slowly to spots closer to the shore. Then I remembered that I had a loud honking horn in my clown box, so I ran to get it and like a maniac ended up scaring myself and the neighbors a lot more than the geese, who took their time getting back into the water, where they stayed, waiting for this crazed human creature to go back inside and let them eat in peace!

This week, as a few geese came back to our home, I remembered a beautiful poem that has stayed with me over the years: “Wild Geese,” by Mary Oliver

“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.” (*See Notes at end*)

“Do not worry about your life,” Jesus says to his disciples, “what you will eat or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens...”

Just before these words, Jesus told the crowd the parable of the rich man who had accumulated so much grain that he decided to pull down his barns in order to build bigger ones. The parable ends in this way. “But, God said to him, *‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’* So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Then Jesus turns to his disciples, calling them to a life that is more in harmony with the ravens and the lilies than with the rich fool. He is certainly not telling them to ignore others who lack adequate food, water or clothing. That is NOT what “being rich toward God” is all about! (Swanson)

I hear Jesus responding to the fretting and squabbling around him, in the crowd, among his disciples, from the religious leaders of his day: the anxiety about having enough, the fear that there’s not enough for everyone. We all struggle to find a secure, safe place in the world, and for most, if not all of us here, our lives are not threatened by the lack of basic necessities for survival; rather, in our Western society, we are bombarded by a vast array of options to choose from and questions to worry about: which foods are healthy to eat, how to deal with cancer, heart disease or dementia, how to protect ourselves and our families on the Internet, where to live as we grow older,

And Jesus says to us: *Consider the ravens*, how God feeds them, how they live without worry or storehouses. Pause to *consider the lilies*, how they grow without toil, how their beauty reveals the astounding glory of God. As we heard in Psalm 104, *God, you are clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment. You make springs gush forth in the valleys, they flow between the hills. You bring forth food from the earth, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart.*

Sometimes worries about our physical needs and material things can distract us, throw us off balance. Our focus wanders away from what is truly important for the aliveness of our spirits. And so, Jesus says, turn toward the natural world, centering yourself on the wonders and abundance revealed there. Let God free you from anxiety and strengthen your heart. (Swanson) Here in NH we are blessed to be so close to mountains and lakes, woods and animals.

Consider God’s creation, whatever precious plant or animal you encounter, how it may, in the words of Mary Oliver, be “calling to your imagination” and revealing something about “your place in the family of things.”

This morning, join me in considering the wild geese...

On any given night, spring or fall, hundreds of millions of migrant birds are flying over the United States and its offshore waters. In a book entitled “One Hundred Cranes, Praying with the Chorus of Creation,” William Fitzgerald writes: The wild geese “call us to look up and out. The honking geese shake us from winter’s sleep and alert us to peer out at our global home and to take flight with our imaginations toward what might lie beyond.”

Some mysterious migratory instinct pushes wild geese and something allures them, pulls them. Fitzgerald asks: "Is there not within us a pull, a yearning to vault beyond the restraints, beyond the barricade of daily worry and strife?" (*Fitzgerald, 48-49*).

Without radio or radar, creatures like the wild geese make amazing journeys, honing in on where to go in spite of enormous odds and obstacles. Their V formations are a wonder to behold, aren't they? As humans, it is in our DNA to imagine and move beyond seemingly insurmountable limitations. This is God in us, the divine energy that pushes and propels us from within, with the yearning to love and to be loved, to explore and discover our true selves and our true purpose. This same divine energy pulls us toward the unknown, the mystery and possibilities of life, in the here and now as well as in the hereafter.

In times of struggle, creatures like the wild geese can stir our hearts and our imaginations, calling us to look once again toward the horizon, beyond what may be confining or weighing down our spirits. In the course of their migratory journey, they break a path for each other; they take turns at the point of the V; they keep others in line as well as helping them onwards. Two geese will fall out of formation to fly with a wounded companion. (*Fitzgerald*). Isn't that something to consider, and consider deeply? A poem by Denise Levertov-

"Their high pitched baying
as if in prayer's unison

remote, undistracted, given over
utterly to belief

the skein of geese
voyages south,
 hierarchic arrow of its convergence toward
 the point of grace
swinging and ripping, ribbon tail
of a kite, loftily

over lakes where they have not
elected to rest,

over men who suppose
earth is man's, over golden earth

preparing itself
for night and winter

 We humans
are smaller than they and crawl
unnoticed,

about and about the smoky map." (*See Notes at end*)

Yes, wild geese can remind us to be humble in all our relationships, with the earth and our neighbors—human, animal, mineral and vegetable.

May we allow ourselves to be pushed and pulled by God toward fulfillment and new life. May we surge ahead, flying through and above any turbulence. May we form communities based on faith and friendship, on nurturing and being nurtured, on inspiring and being inspired. May we be wise enough to know when to lead and when to follow, when we may need to change course... Most of all, may we trust in God to nourish, guide and direct us (*Fitzgerald, 52-53*).

Consider the ravens and the lilies and the geese. Jesus tells us:

Do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink; do not keep worrying. Instead strive for the kingdom of God and these things will be given to you as well.

Strive for reconciliation and kinship, that all might find their place in the family of things.

So, this week when the geese come ashore again, I am going to put on my boots, go out quietly and take the time to consider them as creatures that are as noble on the ground as they are in the water and the air. That said, I think that God may be quietly working this out in an unexpected way. You see, Steve and I just happen to be getting a puppy, and I've heard that geese avoid barking dogs.... But, if it turns out that the geese frighten the puppy away, well, that will not be cause for worry, but rather another wondrous thing to consider. I'll have to work out some sharing of the space between geese, dog and humans, don't you think?

Thanks be to God! Amen.

NOTES

Fitzgerald, William. *One Hundred Cranes, Praying with the Chorus of Creation*. Forest of Peace Publishing (Leavenworth KS, 1996), pp. 48-53.

Oliver, Mary. *New and Selected Poems*. Beacon Press (Boston, 1992), p. 110. You may also "Google" this poem and find it on the Internet.

Roberts, Elizabeth and Elias Amidon, ed. *Earth Prayers From Around The World*. HarperCollins Publishing (San Francisco, 1991), p. 260 (poem by Denise Levertov).

Swanson, Mark N. "A Sermon for Animal Day." LSTC, October 3, 2007. Luke 12: 22-31. www.letallcreationpraise.org. This homily was preached in the chapel of the Lutheran School of Theology. Thank you for the theme: "Consider..."