

## SEASON OF CREATION - Animal Sunday

### Jesus teaches a class on bio-empathy

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

15th Sunday after Pentecost - September 18, 2022

Texts: Job 39:1-12, 26, 30; Psalm 104:14-23, 31; Luke 12:22-31

Job 39:1-12, 26, 30 *God spoke to Job, who was suffering, out of a whirlwind:*

“Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you observe the calving of the deer? Can you number the months that they fulfill, and do you know the time when they give birth, when they crouch to give birth to their offspring, and are delivered of their young? Their young ones become strong, they grow up in the open; they go forth, and do not return to them. Who has let the wild ass go free? Who has loosed the bonds of the swift ass, to which I have given the steppe for its home, the salt land for its dwelling place? It scorns the tumult of the city; it does not hear the shouts of the driver. It ranges the mountains as its pasture, and it searches after every green thing. Is the wild ox willing to serve you? Will it spend the night at your crib? Can you tie it in the furrow with ropes, or will it harrow the valleys after you? Will you depend on it because its strength is great, and will you hand over your labor to it? Do you have faith in it that it will return, and bring your grain to your threshing floor?”

Psalm 104:14-23, 31

You, Beloved Maker, cause the grass to grow for the cattle,  
and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth,  
**and wine to gladden the heart, oil to make the face shine,  
and bread to strengthen the human heart.**

The trees of the generous One are watered abundantly,  
the cedars of Lebanon planted by the divine hand.

**In them the birds build their nests;  
the stork has its home in the fir trees.**

The high mountains are for the wild goats;  
the rocks are a refuge for the conies.

**You have made the moon to mark the seasons;  
the sun knows its time for setting.**

You make darkness, and it is night,  
when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.

**The young lions roar for prey, seeking food from God.  
When the sun rises, they withdraw and rest in their dens.**

People go out to their work and to their labor until the evening.

**May God's glory endure forever; may the Creator rejoice in all that is made.**

Luke 12:22-31 *Jesus' teaching on bio-empathy (learning from nature) comes right after his parable of the rich man who gained nothing by hoarding his wealth.* Jesus said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, 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: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well."



Jesus was quite the environmental science teacher; at least, he taught from nature a lot. I hear there's a new term for that: bio-empathy.<sup>1</sup> Not just observing, "but seeing things from nature's point of view - understanding, respecting, and learning from it." Consider the ravens. Consider the lilies. Consider the grass. Consider the mountain goats, and how they might feel about hikers invading their turf.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus might have been telling the disciples, "When the going gets tough, turn to wonder."<sup>3</sup> *Wonder* at the ravens, the lilies. (Remember, too, wonder has more than one meaning.) The going *was* tough for the people who followed Jesus. They were generally not the ones building more barns to store larger harvests; they lived in tiny houses with no locks on the doors; they didn't have much to steal. Most people owned only one set of clothes, and they used their cloaks, their outerwear, as blankets to keep warm at night. I'd call that kind of a tough life.

They also lived a lot closer to nature than we do. Aside from the odd camping trip, we mostly see nature through a window or a car windshield; or maybe just through the glass screen of our digital devices. That makes Jesus' lesson on bio-empathy even more important: learn from nature now or there may be no nature left to learn from. The only wilderness we see may be those

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Johansen on Bio-empathy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5p2HiKqxVPM>

<sup>2</sup> A mountain goat peers down at hikers below along Hawthorne Peak in Juneau, Alaska, on August 21, 2022. Photo by Becky Bohrer. <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2022/08/photos-of-the-week-camel-super-bull-giant-hand/>

<sup>3</sup> This saying is actually borrowed from Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*.

stunning landscapes preserved as screensavers on our computers. Wonderful though these views may be, we lose the wonder of sound, smell, touch and taste.

When we lose wonder, we also lose compassion for the lives and suffering of other beings; when we lose compassion, we cease to care. Nature is like teeth: ignore it and it'll disappear.

The biblical book of Job tells the story of a man who was, no question, suffering. *All* of his property stolen or destroyed, *all ten* of his children killed in a freak accident, his own health ruined, so God could prove a point to Satan. Really? Job sits on a pile of garbage and complains. He's fed up, and he lets God know it. Until finally, toward the end of the book, God shows up in a whirlwind and says, "Job, my man. I love you, but it's time to get over yourself. You are not the center of the universe. Job, when the going gets tough, turn to wonder: consider the mountain goats, the deer, the wild horses, galloping across the plains. How do you think they live? Don't I take care of them? Now get off that garbage heap and pay attention." Turn to wonder.

In her new book, *Sacred Nature: Restoring our Ancient Bond with the Natural World*, writer Karen Armstrong draws the connection between wonder and compassion.<sup>4</sup> Armstrong might be called a contemporary prophet of compassion; she was instrumental in forming the international



Charter of Compassion. Cities around the world have signed on to this charter, pledging to live in a more caring way. As you know, Rochester is a Charter of Compassion City, and today marks the fifth anniversary of our officially being so! Check it out! Yup, September 18, 2017.

Here are the first three articles of the charter:<sup>5</sup>

- Compassion is recognizing suffering.
- Compassionate action is a wise response to suffering.
- As members of our community, each individual can acknowledge and embrace the caring and compassionate connection to all beings, and celebrate it.

Notice the wording: a caring and compassionate connection to *all beings* (yes, that includes animals, birds, fish, insects, those the Dakota people would call "all our relatives," in addition to our human brothers and sisters). Wildness and wonder, compassion and care are woven together in a single self-replicating movement - the movement of creation, built in by the Creator.

We in Minnesota are fortunate to have access to some of the most unspoiled nature in the country, if not the world. We should be full of wonder. More than one ribbon on our burning

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<sup>4</sup> Armstrong was recently interviewed by Kerri Miller on MPR's "Talking Volumes."

<https://www.mprnews.org/episode/2022/09/16/talking-volumes-karen-armstrong-on-sacred-nature>. While you're there, you might also check out the Saturday 9/17 episode of The Moth Radio Hour: Our relationships with animals.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.rochestermn.gov/about/city-of-compassion>

bush lists the Boundary Waters as a place to preserve. How many of us have cabins or other favorite spots “up north”? I moved from Japan, one of the most densely populated countries in the world, to a home “up north.” In front of the house rose a high wooded ridge, dense with undergrowth. One day, I had an epiphany, a waking vision. But it was real, and it was full of wonder. Standing outside my house, I caught a glimpse of a dog gliding through the bushes. A big black dog. No, not a dog! A bear! OMG! Maybe 50 yards away. He paid no attention to me, though I’m sure he - or she - smelled me, maybe even sensed my thumping heart, my elation and my fear. Consider the black bears, how they live: where they give birth, how they feed their young. Wonder: how does our super-lit-up, noisy, polluted world appear to them? How have we encroached on their homelands, their hunting grounds? Wildness, wilderness, and wonder still exist so close to us, just a breath away.



What would Jesus say? “Friends, you are worried and anxious over many things. You mourn the destruction humans have already wrought on this earth, you fear for your children’s future on a planet that may well be dying. Yet you still think you don’t have enough, and what you do have you lock up inside walls and borders, and hoard it.” To us, Jesus repeats his lesson on bio-empathy: “Consider the natural world, and wonder at it. Let wonder awaken compassion. Let compassion stir you to care for all beings.” Think of the return of the eagle, so recently threatened. We *can* empathize; we *can* change. Just because Jesus says we’re more valuable than sparrows doesn’t give us license to destroy their habitat out of a lack of care. We can learn to see nature from a birds-eye view.



Pause with me for a moment. Is the going tough? Then turn to wonder! Pay respect to the Dakota people who lived here for thousands of years, in harmony with nature, drawing sustenance from this earth without destroying it. Honor those with the foresight to keep this property safe for life. Did you know that we are an official Monarch Waystation and a Certified Wildlife Habitat? Can you feel compassion for the creatures who still take refuge here: birds and butterflies, rabbits and voles, snakes that burrow and tunnel, mice that see no reason why we shouldn’t share our house with them as they have shared their home with us? I have personally seen three deer cross this very lawn. A fox has been sighted.

So—take some time right now for wonder. Look and listen, smell and touch what still lies all around us. Breathe in: compassion/breathe out: care.

Amen. Thanks be to God.

## **Prayers**

Loving Creator, thank you for the animals that enrich our lives with their warm furry presence: the pets that share our joys and woes and never criticize or hold a grudge. May we treat them well; they are a peaceful link with the wildness that inhabits the world.

Again this morning, we are filled with compassion for those parts of the world suffering from storm and flood, earthquake and wildfires and human actors run amuck. In our prayers and in our desire to help, may we remember the animals, both wild and domestic, who suffer from our mistakes through no fault of their own.

As covid and other maladies take their toll, let us remember that part of the cause is our encroachment on the habitat of wild creatures. Help us find a better way to co-exist.

In the midst of all, we thank you for the gift of music: the music contrived and perfected by humans, in our brass ensemble; and the music of the natural world that sings around us. Give us ears to hear.

In our prayers, we remember those close to us who suffer: those recovering from surgery; for those who are lonely or whose lives have changed; we pray for our children whose suffering we would carry if we could. We remember all who mourn, and ask your tender comfort for their broken hearts.

Remember us all in your mercy and teach us to pray:  
Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,  
source of all that is and that shall be, Father and Mother of us all,  
Loving God, in whom is heaven:  
the hallowing of your name echoes through the universe!  
The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world!  
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!  
Your beloved community of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.  
With the bread we need for today, feed us.  
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.  
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.  
From trials too great to endure, spare us.  
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.  
For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever. Amen.