

The Journey to the Sacred, Part 4

“What is a Holy Animal?”

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Countryside Community Church

January 28, 2018

Scripture: Job 38:39-39:30 and Matthew 18:12-14

I. Animals of Spirit

In this series “Journey to the Sacred,” we are considering again Phoenix Affirmation 3, *Christian love of God includes celebrating the God whose Spirit pervades and whose glory is reflected in all of God’s Creation, including the earth and its ecosystems, the sacred and secular, the Christian and non-Christian, the human and non-human.* Eric has helped us consider sacred water, sacred person and sacred vocation. Today we reflect on the sacred animal.

Now I consider this a terrific quirk of fate that I get to preach on the week in this series that deals with non-humans. I am not a “nature person.” In fact, most of my life is spent inside. So, unless the animals that we are speaking about today are those very few species that we humans would allow in our homes, I know very little about them.

Another quirk of fate happens to be that one of my favorite books is one that you can find in the stores under the “nature” category. Of course, it was required reading in my college religion class, or I never would have read it at all. The book is titled “Pilgrim at Tinker Creek,” written by Annie Dillard, a poet and novelist who taught in the English Department at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut.

Her story describes what she observed sitting on the banks of a creek in Puget Sound. She simply watched nature for an extended period of time, and then compared what she saw with what she experienced as a human in the midst of the same creation that she was observing. Of course, the way she describes it all is what makes it such a great book. She speaks of the fish in the creek and of goldfish in her home; she tells stories of frogs, otters, praying mantis, water bugs, and about the overall amazing variety of nature, as she interacts with it. While she takes in the glorious show of creation, she reflects on the meaning and purpose of it all.

One of her chapters is titled “Fecundity.” I had to look that word up at the time. It refers to the abundance of life and the ability to recreate in abundance. It’s about the rich and fertile nature of all life. Annie’s wonder grew with everything she witnessed. But alongside the wonder, she also noticed that everything in the midst of its fertile ground also dies. In observing the random and often brutal death of the creatures she is observing, she finds herself stuck in the middle of a paradox about how the beauty and intricacy of life also includes the stark and often cruel inevitability of death. As she works through the paradox in her writing she says. “Either this

world, my mother, is a monster, or I myself, am a freak.” Either she has to believe that the creator of all of this is in fact a monster and enjoys raising creation up only to watch it die, or she herself is an anomaly among creation and needs a lobotomy in order to be content with everything around her on their terms.

What she discovers of course is that life is lived *within* the paradox and that both living and dying are part of the spectrum of life. In order to live, one must die (where have we heard that before?). By sitting near a creek and taking in both the abundance and the death, Annie Dillard was able to find the sacred in its midst. That creek bed allowed her a glimpse of the divine, and her connection to it. And, through her sacred vocation of writing, she was able to show what she saw to me. And I didn’t need to even go outside to catch it!

The animal world is tremendous and full of surprises. If you stop to take notice, it points us in the direction of the activity of God in every direction it takes. For those who choose to participate with that world all kinds of wonders abound.

Three years ago, we did an animal blessing here at Countryside and all kinds of people brought their pets to the church for a special prayer. It was clear many people in this community engage with animals quite regularly, and that they are, indeed, glimpsing the sacred in those relationships. For them, being with their animal shows them the very presence of God and exemplifies how God’s love is experienced generously and unconditionally, throughout creation.

My youngest daughter Maddy is a perfect example of this experience of God in her life. Her creature is Sydney, a 12-year-old black pug. She rescued him a couple of years ago while she was working in a doggie daycare business. We call her the dog whisperer because she has a special way with them. Dogs seem to naturally flock to her and follow her around. Through Sydney, she has been able to see the sacred in all dogs, and all creatures by extension. She is able to connect to Sydney in a way that points to something even bigger and beyond them into a realm of holiness that is open to all. I am amazed watching her engage with animals. She relates so easily with them, while engaging with other humans seems to be much more of struggle for her! Maddy was raised with Minnie, her childhood coonhound, and in that relationship, she learned what it means to love and be loved, console and be consoled, and to celebrate death as well as life. She will experience pain again when it’s Sydney’s time to die, but if you ask her, she would go through it as many times as necessary in order to have experienced the abundant and unencumbered love that she receives from their relationship. For Maddy, Sydney is the face of God.

Maddy is not alone in her experience of pets connecting her to the holy. These pictures were taken by our 4th, 5th, and 6th grade Arts Affirmation students as part of their photography project on family pets this week. Many of our students could tell us similar stories about how important their relationships with their pets are for showing them unconditional love and consolation, activities of God in our lives. This activity fills their hearts and guides their steps.

II. The Lost Sheep

Sustainable Human Video “How Wolves Changed the River.” You can view this video at this link: https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A_www.youtube.com_watch-3Fv-3Dy5a50BhXz-2DQ-26sns-3Dem&d=DwICAg&c=euGZstcaTDllvimEN8b7jXrwqOf-v5A_CdpgnVfiiMM&r=VNhrj4SqomXrJDCoXKAyrbma_mdudkD1NjXExaMNZ58&m=c1Ow7ZdC4Cp7rsIMCRN3yi-8okzSK4jUcLCi3ZOMUFs&s=6ewKFduLOfNxsHDJ-p-fk0ciyn22s9a3spsmqHfli73g&e=

I read an article this week from the Yale School of Forestry and the Environment saying that Cougars were just officially declared extinct in the eastern US (<http://e360.yale.edu/digest/cougars-officially-declared-extinct-in-eastern-u-s-removed-from-endangered-species-list>). According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service there are 2,340 species currently endangered or threatened in the world today. And that’s counting only those species that we can track. How many more are dying out without even the honor of being recognized as having existed at all?

The video we just watched shows us how introducing just a small number of wolves back into Yellowstone National Park changed the whole ecosystem there. Plants came back, which attracted more birds and insects and shored up the banks of the creeks and the rivers so pools could form, bringing back the possibility of an expanded species list who live within or are sustained by the water. Nature shows us that everything is connected to everything else. There are thousands of articles and videos out there that show us the effects of losing even just one species from our ecosystems.

The dangers coming from possibly losing the honeybee shows us the repercussions of not keeping an eye out for those populations threatened or at risk. Honeybees are threatening extinction because of our excessive use of pesticides in crops and because of certain blood-sucking parasites that only reproduce in bee colonies.

The extinction of bees would affect plants and animals, which in turn would affect the fuels that are currently available, and the type of materials available for things like clothing. If plants can’t grow, then our meadows would turn to deserts, and there would be nothing to hold the earth to the side of mountains, causing mudslides and destruction, until everything would be just a barren wasteland. And, because **honeybees pollinate 70 % of the 100-crop species that provide us with 90% of our food**, if honeybees were allowed to go extinct, humanity itself would be at risk of extinction.

Perhaps it will be the extinction of humanity that will be the turning point for this ecological disaster we find ourselves in. Will it take the total elimination of humanity in order to allow the planet to begin regenerating and healing itself? Or will humanity begin to pay attention to its destructive behaviors and start taking the necessary steps to be a part of the healing process? Some would argue that it is already too late to be asking that question and that we are already on an irreparable path to total extinction.

But what if we start paying attention? What if we were to all sit by a creek for a season and allow it to change how we behave in the world? Jesus tells us that losing even one sheep throws the balance off. God is constantly aware of and in search of all those who are lost or drop out of sight.

God is working with multiple galaxies, constantly creating and sustaining life, and moving all things to good. If we would have God's will done on earth as it is in heaven, perhaps we can at least start paying attention to the things we are throwing into the trash or exuding into the air. Perhaps we can think twice before dumping chemicals into our water supplies or passing on the bicycle in order to drive that 5 miles to work.

The animals all around us are showing us the sacredness of our living together. How might you begin to pay attention to what they are telling us?