

## Sometimes we Flutter and Fail, and Sometimes we Soar

(Sermon done on Bird Sunday, April 28, 2019 at Osler Mennonite Church)

**Texts:** Matthew 10:29-31

*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.*

Isaiah 40:31

*But those who trust in the Lord will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint.*

Psalms 104:12

*The birds of the sky nest by the waters;  
they sing among the branches.*

**Shape of the Sermon:** In the first part, I want to explore the wonders of birds, their unique characteristics, and their mysterious ways. In the second part I want to talk about how we are the sparrow that falls. In part three, we want to look at how we sometimes are the eagles that soar.

### **Part One: The Wonder of Birds:**

The diminutive **Housewren** spends winter in the south of United States. In March the males leave for their month-long journey northward to places like Saskatchewan. Upon arrival, the males begin immediately to build two and even three houses. Then they wait. The females arrive up to 10 days later. The eager male takes a female and shows her the houses he has prepared. If she is impressed, she selects the house of her choice, and essentially tells the male that he can be her boyfriend. The courtship can then begin. (is there any application to the human situation?!)

The best-known duck we have in Saskatchewan is the **Mallard**, with its iridescent colors. In May it will make its nest on the ground, near a pond of water. It will lay 8 or more eggs. But it can only lay one egg per day. Yet 4 weeks later, when the eggs hatch, all the eggs hatch on the same day. How can that happen? The female duck knows that once the baby duckling hatches, it must reach water within a day. So how does it manage to hatch all its eggs on the same day, when they were laid more than a week apart? The clever duck lays its first egg. It then covers the

egg with warm furry duck fur and departs. Next day it lays egg #2, covers up the two eggs and leaves the nest. This she does for as many days as she lays eggs. Once all the eggs are laid, she and her partner sit on the eggs for 4 weeks. Then miraculously all the eggs hatch on the same day after which she takes the ducklings to the water where they are raised.

**Canada Geese**, when they migrate, fly in a V formation. Why? Flying at 2,000 feet up to 75 kms an hour, the geese catch the wind currents, and like a sailboat, they tack the wind to their advantage. But the lead goose spends up to 50% more energy than the trailing birds, so there is much honking, as the lead bird drifts to the rear, while another bird takes the lead. So, by taking turns, each lead bird slipstreams and makes it possible for the trailing birds to fly with less energy. Bicycle racers do that. They practice a science that is unique. But who told the birds to do that?

The **American White Pelican** has the widest wingspan of any Sask bird – almost 3 meters. But this bird cooperates with other pelicans to find food. A half dozen birds corner several fish. Then they all dip their massive heads into the water at the same time, and the fish cannot escape. The pelicans at the weir in Saskatoon catch their fish using this method. But the pelicans at the weir do another interesting thing. After a day at the weir, they all fly to **Redberry Lake** for the night, a distance of 85 kms. Next morning the birds return to the weir. Every day they fly 170 kilometers. **Rob, Brandy, and Zenon Born**: you live at Redberry... that is just about the same distance you make every Sunday when you come to attend church!

The **Red-tailed Hawk** is a bird of grace as it soars in the sky looking for a mouse or a small bird. It has telescopic eyes that can spot a mouse in the field 2,000 feet away. When it sees a mouse it, dives at a speed of over a hundred miles an hour and, using its talons, grabs the mouse firmly. Its eyes are so good, that if it could read, it would be able to read the headlines of a newspaper from a quarter of a mile away. That is just under a half kilometer.

The **Sharp-tailed Grouse** is the bird symbol of Saskatchewan. It is often called a prairie chicken. Did you know this is the most inefficient flyer among all birds? It never migrates, because flying takes enormous energy. Its body is very heavy and its wings very short. It flies a couple of hundred meters, and must land to regain

energy. This bird rarely flies for more than 30 seconds at a time. **The Common Swift**, meanwhile, can fly non-stop for months at a time (one tracked for 10 months). The much larger **albatross** can fly for days and weeks.

**The songs that birds trill** continue to fascinate bird watchers. Is a bird song learned by the baby bird from its parents? Is it inherited? Why is the song of the **Western Meadowlark** almost always the same? Why doesn't it sing like a **crow**? And why do almost all bird songs happen in the spring and not in the fall? Why do **Purple Martins**, like the ones we have in our Church Cemetery, build their nests in a colony? Why does a **Goldfinch** migrate to southern USA, but a **Chickadee** does not? Why is the poop of a **Franklin's Gull** always white. Why do the feet of **Blue-winged Teal** ducks not freeze when they swim in ice-cold water? How can a **Killdeer** find its way to Mexico, and how does it find its way back again? Why is **Bruce Boldt** so interested in owls, and why does he put little bands around their legs? Why is the farmyard of **Wilf and Ruth Buhler** one of the finest mini-ecosites for dozens of species of birds? Why don't we like sparrows and crows and magpies, but we like hawks, whooping cranes, and pelicans? Why has the **Canada Goose** and the **Raven** extended their territory to include the Osler area, when 50 years ago, these birds were unknown here? Why have field birds, like the **Western Meadowlark**, the **Burrowing Owl**, and the **Loggerhead Shrike** (often called Butcherbird) almost disappeared from this area?

**Most of these questions have answers.** But not all. The "what" questions are the easiest to answer. But the "why" questions require introspect and thought. The disappearance of field birds occur when we take away the habitat they once lived in. We can go back to Genesis chapter one and two, where we learn that God created birds on the 5<sup>th</sup> day and then pronounced that the birds were very good. But God had given the birds a home. And now that we have removed the homes in our area for birds, namely natural grassland, they are disappearing in front of our eyes. What are solutions to problems we have helped to create? The prophets for these issues are **Dr Stuart Houston, Trevor Herriot, and Alan Smith.** If we do not listen to these local prophets, then there is less hope. Our own **Bruce Boldt** can teach us about conservation and Creation Care of birds and their habitat.

**There is a new bird anthology** that is opening up. The new approach, as pioneered by **Candace Savage**, with her book, “Bird Brains”, and **Tim Birkhead**, with his book, “The Wisdom of Birds”, looks at birds, not only as a descriptive species, but rather as birds having intelligence and wisdom. These authors allow us to see birds in a new dimension, with a fresh analysis. Birds are more than part of nature, but rather they are the part of nature that can give us wisdom, that begins with knowledge but transcends to contemplation and reflection. We have artists like **Robin Neudorf** and **Glen Grismer**, who allow us to see what birds are through their creations.

**The Bible is full of Birds.** **Elijah** is fed by a raven who brings him food while he is hiding from King Ahab. The Israelites in the wilderness complain that their diet of manna is boring and tedious, so God sends flocks of **Quail** for which they are happy. But they eat so much that their gorging creates diet problems and the Israelites begin to die. **Jeremiah** identifies migrating birds like the stork, the crane and the swallow. God forbids the eating of all raptors like eagles, hawks, buzzards, and vultures, but permits the eating of birds that feed on plants and insects. God specifically says that offerings of the Turtledove is desirable. Unlike the lambs and goats whose blood was desirable, the priest was ordered to rip the bird in half, and to commit the two parts as an offering.

**Part Two: The Human Condition – We sometimes Flutter and Fall.** Anna Neufeld has beautifully shown us herself as a bird that falters, flutters, and fails. In her portrayal, Anna is the sparrow that is wounded, that is alive, but cannot be airborne, and cannot function in its environment. Anna makes adequate wing movements, but she cannot fly. She is compromised, vulnerable and wounded.

When my mother, **Maria Pauls**, was 11, and lived in Grigorjewka, South Russia, her parents died within 10 days of each other. It was 1918, and one died of the Spanish Flu, the other of Tuberculosis. Her older sister, Helena, had died a year earlier. Her baby sister had died just months earlier. My mother describes in detail standing under a Mulberry Tree, pondering life and death. Now the oldest sibling, she was about to be given away to relatives. Under the tree, after her father’s death, she asks, “what shall we children do now”. She went through Angst and Agony as a pre-teen. She was wounded, would be robbed of a normal childhood, and as Anna showed us, would not be able to fly.

Following my stroke in the fall of 2016, I was the wounded sparrow. I could not fly. I couldn't even walk! But over a year ago I had a dream that I was running across a field. As I ran, I said to myself, this is not true, it must be a dream. And it was a dream. I woke up. I was disappointed. I had a second dream. Again I was running across the same field. Again I argued with myself that it was a dream. And I woke up disappointed I could not fly, or even run.

As we gather together today, we are just getting news from Immigration Canada that Wallah has been rejected and at this time from coming to Canada. His Syrian wife, Buthayna, was sponsored by Osler Mennonite Church. They have a 3 year old son Mohammad. Buthayna is devastated. Even as Anna's bird fluttered, Buthayna is the bird that cannot fly.

But the sparrow that Jesus spoke of in the Gospel, is often the sparrow that few of us wants to talk about openly. These sparrows that cannot fly are amongst many of us. These sparrows are illnesses, health concerns, job interviews that went badly, disputes with spouses, conflicts with children, and debts that piled up.

Occasionally the wounded sparrow becomes sad. There are complaints, perhaps. There may be disputes. There may be depression. The Sparrow cannot fly.

A most wonderful theologian, Paul Tillich, has written a book, "The Courage to Be". Tillich calls God, the "Ground of Our Being". As Tillich tries to figure out what causes sadness in many people, he argues that we are threatened with an ontological fear of "non being". This loneliness that we may be nothing, and that nobody cares, and that life is meaningless, causes despair, Angst, and, if left unchecked, may spiral into the Abyss.

Nietsche carries the concept of the Abyss even further. He says that if you keep looking into the Abyss, the Abyss will stare back at you. If you stare long enough, the Abyss turns you into a Monster. And that may be the end.

If you are a wounded sparrow with a small issue, or one that is more serious, remember that you are dealing with damaged well-being. Whereas once you could fly, you are now grounded. Like Anna's sparrow, you cannot fly.

The Sparrows in our lives may be caused by health concerns, by relational issues, by employment concerns, or by grief that will not loose its grip.

What matters is that Jesus identified the fallen sparrow. What he said is so important. He did not say that he would provide a new set of wings. Or that the old wings would be fixed. Jesus said that God would care for a fallen sparrow or a wounded sparrow. Exactly what this might mean is something we have to figure out together. It probably means God has said we would not be left alone. The 1968 existential New Creed of the United Church of Canada, says this (I quote only a few lines):

We are not alone,  
We live in God's world.  
We trust in God.  
In life and in death,  
God is with us.  
We are not alone,  
Thanks be to God.

### **Part Three: The Human Triumph: We soar like Eagles**

A couple of minutes ago, I shared my two dreams with you. In both I saw myself running on a large screen from left to right. But before the dream was over, I said it could not be true because I had had a stroke, and the best I could do was limp. I woke up disappointed. I was the wounded sparrow. Well, I had a third dream a month later. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> dream I once again saw myself running on a screen from left to right across a field. But unlike the first two dreams, I did not try to convince myself that it was a dream. I watched myself running gracefully. I watched myself getting smaller as I faded into the distance. And then I was gone. In the morning I woke up and recalled the dream vividly. I was on a high. I had become the eagle, soaring above my disability. I had accepted my human condition, and I could rise above adversity. Christy Martens-Funk has shared that she is unable to stand. But she explains that she can rise. And so in this church, you will not hear a song-leader say "please stand". But you will hear the song-leader say, "Please rise". This allows Christy to rise and soar like an eagle with her most lovely voice. There are others here, who also rise, even if they cannot stand.

In Warman about 10 years ago, there was a woman who was 101 years old. Her family were quite insensitive and openly talked about her imminent death, even

though she was in good health, and in control of her mental faculties. She was a bit depressed because she was not dying, something her children were predicting. Through no fault of her own, she had become the fallen sparrow. One day she announced in Mennonite Plautdietsch, “Met dit Stoewen jeft et nuscht; Ekj Jgleev Ekj Kjeep Mie, een nie-et Kjleed” (trans: with this dying business, there seems to be no progress; I’m going to buy myself a new dress”). She bought herself a new dress and celebrated her 102<sup>nd</sup> birthday, not as a sparrow, but as a soaring eagle.

Just a few years ago, Emmet had a heart issue. His family were down a bit. Perhaps feeling like the sparrow. And then there was good news. They and all of us were able to soar like an eagle, with joy and thanksgiving.

Isaiah lived in troubling times. Things were not going well in Israel. Then one day Isaiah announces that there is hope. He preached hope and trust in Yahweh (God), and offered that we had a choice. Choose hope and we would rise up and soar like eagles. And to this day, Isaiah gives us an opportunity to rise up and soar like an eagle.

To soar like an eagle, cannot be mandated. It must be an individual initiative, with support from the community. When Louise and I worked in Pyongyang, North Korea, some years ago, the Dictator, known as the “Great Leader” issued an edict that everyone could be happy if they painted and drew pictures using only yellow and red. So all over the nation children could only use red and yellow colors. Kim Il Sung issued a happiness solution, but while we were there, we saw only poverty and despair. Kim Il Sung was not able to get his people to soar like eagles. Instead there were sparrows.

To soar like an eagle might be “event specific”. It is possible that we feel we were on cloud #9 on our graduation day or our wedding day or on the birth of our child. But to soar like an eagle could be more inclusive. Social scientists have said there are 7 areas of our lives that need to be in balance. These include our physical, our emotional, our intellectual, our social, spiritual, environmental and occupational well-being elements. When we go about the business of living, we must try to keep these things in balance. If we can we will soar more often like eagles and falter less often like the Sparrow that Jesus talks about. The more often we

practice “community caring’ in our church, the better we will fly together, not always like eagles, but far less often like fluttering sparrows.

As you leave from here, I have some homework for you. The **Baltimore Oriole** is a migratory bird, just a bit smaller than a Robin. It builds a unique roundish/oval nest that sort-of hangs from a twig, made up of intertwined horse-hair, string and other things. It is also the last bird that arrives from the south, sometimes not till May 20. Your assignment is to look for an Oriole and report it to me. If you spot one before June 15, you will do well.

Note to Patty Friesen, our Minister, who is in Grasslands National Park, as I read this sermon at OMC. Are you watching us via live-streaming? You will not find Orioles where you are, but let us know if you spot any **Sharp-tailed Grouse** or **Horned larks**. The ultimate spotting would be the **Burrowing Owl**.

In summary, may you mostly soar like an eagle. If you falter, like Anna’s Sparrow, remember God will be near you, and we will be around to pick you up.

Jake Buhler

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