

God is a Shelter for the Birds and for Us

Ezekiel 17: 3-8, 22-23, Matt.6:25-26, Mark 4:30-32 by Patty Friesen (June 6/21)

Visuals - hiking shoes, backpack, hat, binoculars, phone ID, book, checklist, bible, hymnal, prayer book, journal. (Looking through the binoculars). Ooh, look there through the grass, there is a large bird with a long bill turned downward - that's a (flip through pages of bird book conferring with region and size and behaviour) - that's a long-billed curlew! Oh goody, goody - I'll write him down in my Grasslands National Park bird checklist.

The first thing we learn in birding is how to have the right tools for the job. I like to rely on my National Geographic book that helps me identify region and season and size and song of the bird. This bird book has the dates and places of all the beautiful birds I've seen with over the past 30 years. A regional checklist also serves us for what to expect in what season and where and provides record of the sighting. These are available at national park offices and on Saskatchewan Birds web-site.

Then we need correct vision. Binoculars help zoom in on birds. If we are coordinated enough we can hold and focus the binoculars in one hand, while holding our bird book in the other hand. But most birds we can only hear because they are tucked into places unseen. Then we can ID bird song through our Merlin Bird app on our phone. Birdsong is what led us as humans to invent musical instruments and use our own voices to praise God as the birds do.

Finally, we need community to help us find birds. Lois Siemens and I hunted for a burrowing owl in Grasslands morning and night for days without seeing one but in conferring with neighbouring campers who saw one, I learned where to look and was

rewarded with a sighting my last day. Ultimately birding is a humbling exercise. Even with binoculars and books and fellow birders, we only see birds if they choose to reveal themselves to us. It is not something we can control. We can put ourselves in the right place at the right time of year with the right equipment but ultimately they are revealed as a gift of grace.

These lessons are the same with the spiritual life. We need eyes and ears to see and hear God's voice. Binoculars and bird sound apps are like the spiritual tools of , silence, prayer books, music, art - whatever helps us see and hear God better. And ultimately a good ID book like the Bible tells us where to find God in the history of God's people and in the stories of Jesus. We can write in our bibles as we write in bird books - the dates of what spoke to us when. I have my grandma's bible and it is full of her handwritten responses to the printed word. Like a bird checklist - a journal is also one way we keep track of the observations and experiences of God's work in the ups and downs of our lives.

We can only tap into the Spirit of God if we put ourselves in the right attitude of seeking and openness, and the right places like silence at times, intimate conversations at others, walks in nature at times, worship in church at others. And for me, it was necessary to give up technology and booze for sabbatical to create the silence and clear brain for insight and observation. But ultimately we don't control how God speaks to us or when. We wait and watch and hope and trust and whatever we receive is a gift of grace like a presence of a rare bird. All we can do is put ourselves in the right position of seeking and openness to receive and this is the gift of our spiritual practices.

Let us continue to practice them even if we don't get much out of them because at some point we will.

Star Phoenix writer Lisa Ravary said for all the drama of this past year, media didn't talk much about spirituality and the internal life. It went by the wayside, just when we needed it most. The Oxford University Journal of Public Health published an article noting that "spirituality serves a critical purpose in a person's well-being in a pandemic." Spiritual care forms a care that includes empathy and compassion and the power to heal oneself and others. It goes beyond pop-culture's self-help movement, Ravary says. Rather, the internal life is introspection, connection, transcendence, for which we have plenty of time these days. It is thinking seriously about right and wrong to help us adjust our inner compass, to act as if all living beings and things matter. Ravary goes on, "people I know who live spiritual lives tend to be happier, even in times of trouble." (Star Phoenix, March 3/21).

As a people of faith, we have had our doubts and anxieties this year but we've had a safe place to voice our lament in worship and small group Zooms and find comfort and grounding and ongoing perspective beyond ourselves to others in our community and our refugee family in Lebanon. Our faith and volunteerism and worship have anchored our ships safely in this storm.

Our scriptures today speak of the habitats that are essential for the safety of birds and people. In Ezekiel 17 God is the eagle that plants the sheltering tree which provides safety and justice nesting for the birds of the air and for all people. Great trees in the Old Testament refer to large empires. Ideally this sheltering tree was to be the people of God themselves but when they failed to provide safety and justice for

foreigners, other sheltering empires were raised up like Babylon to do the work. In Daniel 4 (11-12) Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar dreamed of a “great tree” which hosts the “birds of the air.” The empire of Babylon provided shelter for the exiled children of Israel and other nations they dominated. In both Daniel and Ezekiel, it should be noted, the great trees eventually get their tops cropped by God on account of their arrogance. In time the Babylonian empire is replaced by Alexander the Great and the Greek Empire. And then the rise of the Roman Empire. In the Old Testament, God is in charge of the great trees and the rise and fall of empires.

Jesus is very much aware of the way in which great trees were portrayed in the Hebrew canon: they are political entities which extended over and exploited other nations. In the Old Testament God used the great trees for God’s purposes but now in the Gospels, God uses the little trees. The mustard tree in the Mark parable is really a small tree, unlike the Cedar of Lebanon in Ezekial 17. Both the “Great Trees” of the Hebrew Scriptures and the mustard tree of the gospels shelter the birds of the air, but they do so differently. The kingdom of God is not about arrogance or dominance. Jesus says that God wants to protect, care for, and minister to the birds of the world and chooses to do it through small acts rather than power politics. Jesus is the interpretive binocular lens for understanding God’s ways in the world and in this crazy year.

Some people saw the pandemic as God’s wake up call or sign of the times. People in Jesus’ time also believed in conspiracies and end times. Jesus told them, when people speak of wars and famines and earthquakes and pandemics as signs of the end time, do not be disturbed, the end is not yet, (Matthew 24:6). Jesus doesn’t say, when these things happen, you and your society should be thinking carefully of

what you should be repenting of. No, Jesus says, “when bad things happen, stay calm and trust me.” God’s kingdom will not be a sudden terrible event. God’s kingdom has already come in Jesus and continues to come daily through Jesus’ followers.

Jesus gave his followers a prayer about God’s kingdom coming daily on earth as in heaven. God’s kingdom will not come as a sudden global crisis but as a daily practice and revelation. The daily bread prayer grounds us in calm trust in the here and now, not the past and not the future. And in the Lord’s Prayer, we pray for forgiveness every day, not just when a horrible event triggers repentance. Deliverance from evil is not only a prayer for personal protection but a prayer that we be delivered from our own propensity to commit evil.

As New Testament theologian N.T. Wright says, “A lot of talk about where is God in when people suffer, assumes what God’s sovereignty looks like. Jesus unveils a different meaning of divine sovereignty. *This is what divine sovereignty looks like*, he said as he healed a leper or as he announced forgiveness on his own authority to a penitent woman. *This is what it looks like*, he said as he ate with the wrong kind of people. *This is what it looks like*, Jesus said as he broke bread on the last night with his friends. *This is what it looks like*, he said as he chose non-violence, suffered abuse and died. *This is what divine sovereignty looks like*, he said as he gathered astonished disciples after the resurrection. (p. 20, N.T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic*). *This is what it looks like*, Jesus promised as he breathed the Holy Spirit on them with power and authority to change the world.

So trusting in Christ’s divine sovereignty, we as followers of Christ do not wring our hands and ask **Why**, we ask **What** are we called to do. How are we called to be a

sheltering tree for those who suffer? This is what we've been doing throughout this terrible year and continue to. We stay calm and trust our calling. When anxiety rises, we remember Jesus and trust the tools that have been given to us in scripture, in communion, in historical perspectives and in hope for the future. To this end we commune together, bringing a binocular clear focus on the life, death and resurrection of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit gifted to us like a bird. Let us pray the preparatory prayer of communion that draws us deeper into this reflection...