

1st Sunday of Lent – 2021B

Animal stories in the Bible have tremendous appeal. They are the first scripture stories to which we are introduced as children, in part because illustrators find them very enticing subjects. Educator Helen Oppenheimer, in her book *Helping Children Find God*, points out that we often reduce the Bible to a collection of animal stories to entertain children and make our job as catechists easier. We tell kids about the menagerie of Eden, Noah's floating zoo, Jonah's adventure with the great fish, and Jesus riding a donkey into Jerusalem as if salvation history were an animal coloring book with incidental human characters.

And indeed, why not tell the story of Tobit from the point of view of the dog? Or follow Elijah's adventures through the eyes of the ravens that fed him? Truth is, animals do have some interesting cameos in scripture and occasionally take center stage, like Balaam's stubborn and talkative ass. Animals penetrate the pages of scripture from the first fish and fowl of Genesis to the Lamb who lights the holy city in Revelation. When Abraham finds a ram caught in the brambles at Moriah, or the Israelite camp is visited by flocks of quail every evening, these are not charming asides. Peter's discovery of a tax-toting fish in time to meet the toll for himself and Jesus is not an accidental encounter with nature but a recurring sign of God's abundance and sustenance.

These stories remind us that all living things are subject to their Creator, and the whole of creation is groaning under the same sentence of sin, suffering, and death. Global warming is one manifestation of creation's mutual burden, and the gradual poisoning of Earth, air, and water is an indicator of how knit together is the fate of all God's creatures.

We have such a high regard for God's covenant of law with Moses and kingship with David that we sometimes overlook the earlier covenant God made with Noah after the floodwaters subsided. If you ask most people about God's promise to Noah, they invariably remember the rainbow and the pledge to withhold another Earth-threatening deluge. They forget one of the salient features of this early covenant: that it was a promise made not simply to humanity but to every creature that once boarded the ark. The author of Genesis repeats this injunction four times in

this short passage, so that we cannot consider it a textual aberration. The covenant with Noah, so-called, is actually a covenant with creation. When we acknowledge that God's sovereign protection extends to the animal kingdom, we begin to appreciate why Laban's goats adopted spots and stripes for Jacob's sake, locusts and frogs readily fulfilled Moses' predictions, the lions refused to eat Daniel, and the fish obediently spat up Jonah on the shores of Nineveh. God's creatures, cognizant of the favor they have received from their Maker, respond with fervent allegiance and devotion. Meanwhile humankind, regrettably, looks past God's beneficence and stubbornly follows its own fatal designs.

The original temptation story from Mark's gospel is far shorter than those in Matthew and Luke. The other Synoptics take this opportunity to explore the nature of human temptation as well as to point out Jesus' victory over it. Mark, however, recounts the event in two sentences. Rather than detailing three encounters with Satan complete with dueling scripture, we hear only that the Spirit drove Jesus to the desert, and then Satan attempted to exert his authority in the prototypical devil territory of wilderness. What Mark does include is the final portrait of Jesus in the desert that finds its way into artists' renderings: Jesus snugly situated between guardian angels and amicable beasts.

Is this an illustration of Isaiah's peaceable kingdom, the lion lying down with the lamb, a pastoral scene suitable for hanging in parlors? It may appear so at first glance. But then we recall that other hour when an angel kept vigil with Jesus in a garden, and we feel the shudder of anticipated anguish. biblical angels generally show up in case of emergency or with time-shattering news. This may not be such a pleasant hour after all.

We also remember that Jesus is a being of two worlds, heaven and Earth. The angels represent his celestial nature even as the beasts recall his incarnate side. Because this is a temptation story, we may automatically presume that Jesus' strength comes from his "angelic" side, and that temptation seeks entry through his "animal" nature. Yet it was the angels who first rebelled against God in Hebrew story; they alone have the possibility to switch sides through a free choice. Biblical animals, burdened with no such freedom, remain loyal and obedient throughout. Perhaps we are too hasty in fingering our creatureliness as the demon-prone aspect of

our nature. It might be that our “higher” self—our prized intellect—is where pride and its fall are more readily manifest. It could be that while we are focusing on managing the beast, our spiritual side is making its own cerebral bargain with the devil.

In the First Letter of Peter, we discover another example of the elasticity of biblical symbols. The waters of the flood destroyed the surface of the Earth and all life forms left on it according to the story of Noah, yet in the epistles we hear that those in the ark “were saved through water”! Do destruction and salvation lie so close together that one can easily be translated into the other? In the case of our happy sacrament of water, yes. God promised that water would never be used as a divine weapon of mass destruction again, and to seal the bargain, Baptism becomes the premiere medium of saving lives. Though our flesh, our creatureliness, must die, we are guaranteed life in the Spirit by means of this sign of water.

We stand today sandwiched between beasts and angels, heaven and Earth, the flood that kills and the water of life. We are free to follow God’s will or our own. And we alone bear the responsibility for our choices.

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