

“God’s Small Ones”

Psalm 104 (selected verses) – June 5, 2016

INTRO: There are a number of Psalms which are hymns of praise to the Creator. This one today speaks of the wonders of all God has given us, including the heavens, the oceans, the earth and all its creatures—large and small. This Psalm presents a wonderful picture of God as Creator and a sweeping view of the world God made.

As many of you know, I moved to my house in Cudahy this past week. Rather than rush into unpacking lots of boxes, I spent some time exploring my surroundings. I closed on this house the end of March, which means I first saw the house with the yard covered in snow and ice. I didn’t have much of a clue what was hidden there. Now I’ve had two months to watch as the plants and flowers appeared in my flower gardens. The previous owner, must have liked flowers, because she had the yard professionally landscaped and every few days something new appears. In early spring it was red, yellow and white flowers, followed by pinks and reds, and now I’m into the blue, lavender and dark purple phase. Wow. In the past three days I have appreciated: what looks like a tie-died mauve colored iris by my front door; ferns in the front yard; rhubarb in the back corner of my yard, and blooming lilacs in the back. I have lived in 4 parsonages and at each place, I’ve planted some kind of lilac bush. But I was never there long enough for the bush to reach maturity and really go to town with blooms. So now I finally have a big round stand of lilacs. And since I was so fixated on the flowers, I hardly noticed the butterfly which had landed on the blooms that I scared away. Last night I watched the fog creep in from the east, as Carl Sandburg said, “on little cat feet.” It worked its way west toward my block until it surrounded my house. And the first night I was there, I walked into my backyard, and because there is not much light pollution around, just four blocks from the lake, I could see many stars overhead. These are little wonders of creation, but in our busy lives, we may miss them, or take too lightly the gifts they give us.

Barbara Brown Taylor has said: “Nothing reminds me that I am an earthling like seeing the full moon. As much as well-meaning Christians have tried to convince me that I cannot love creation with anything close to the love with which I love God, I remain unconvinced.” (*Learning to Walk in the Dark*)

A Sunday when we celebrate the gardens around our church, gives us the opportunity to think about our place in the created order, and whether when we approach creation, we might also be showing our appreciation to God. The Garden Committee this year, suggested the theme of the small creatures of our world, creatures who share our earth home, but for whom we may not pay much attention, either because we are preoccupied with life in general, or because these creatures are so very small. A new Indiana University study estimated that Earth is home to 1 trillion species of organisms, of which 99.99% have yet to be discovered. Most are microbes---tiny, tiny, tiny. (*The Christian Science Monitor*, 5/3/16) And, the smaller the creatures, probably the easier it is to not pay attention or care much about them.

This Psalm today “puts humankind, as it were, ‘in its place.’ Yes, biblically speaking, humanity occupies a special place in the created order, but not the only place! Psalm 104 is an eloquent reminder that we human beings share our space with a vast array of God’s ‘works,’ including an “earth ... full of God’s creatures.” This Psalm “motivates us to love and enjoy the creation in all its majesty and multiplicity as much as God loves it and enjoys it. To love and enjoy the world will naturally mean ‘to serve it and preserve it.’” (J. Clinton McCann)

“God created the world with order and purpose and anyone or anything that acts against that purpose essentially tries to undo the good creation God established.” (Jerome Creach)

So, I turn to some of God’s small ones--three “B’s”: bees, bats and birds, for whom humanity has not always been adept at seeing that their place in the created order is respected. And we’ve not always done our part to love creation as God loves it.

I have friends who have bee hives on their farm in southwestern WI. I’ve been fortunate to enjoy their honey over a number of years. But they have had trouble keeping the bees alive. Part of the issue is the pesticides that are applied to the fields around them. If the bees just stayed on their few acres, or went to the next door neighbor, they would all be fine because they don’t use the pesticides. But bees don’t just stay put, you can’t fence them in. They move much further away before flying back to the hive, and those excursions are where they get the pesticide exposure. My friends have talked about starting some hives here in Tosa, because it would be much easier to watch over

them here than trucking to the southwestern part of the state. But the issue is still the same—because of all the chemicals we put on our lawns.

Bats: Some of you know me well enough to know that my favorite creatures in the world are not bats. I've served in too many churches where bats were convinced they should share inside space with me, and I'm just not comfortable with that. I've been known to dive under a table, in my early years of ministry when physically that was more of a possibility, if a bat came flying through during a worship committee meeting. And yet, here I am today reminding us that an Earth without bats would be a very different and much poorer place. More than 1,300 species of bats around the world are playing ecological roles that are vital to the health of natural ecosystems and human economies, consuming vast amounts of insects, including some of the most damaging agricultural pests. Other bats pollinate many valuable plants, ensuring the production of fruits that support local economies, as well as diverse animal populations. Fruit-eating bats in the tropics disperse seeds that are critical to restoring cleared or damaged rainforests. Even bat droppings (called guano) are valuable as a rich natural fertilizer. A single little brown bat can eat up to 1000 mosquitoes in a single hour. Can any of the rest of us claim that kind of productivity?,

And finally, birds. I could tell about the wild birds in our yards, and my friend who tells me she can identify the birds in her neighborhood just by their songs, but instead I'd like to tell you about a pet bird named Lady, who came to live with Sr. Joan Chittister. Joan had long had birds and when one of her birds escaped her house, she was so distraught that she never wanted to think about ever having a bird again. The bird must have slipped out a door without anyone knowing it and never made its way home. If she couldn't keep track of that one bird, what's to say she might not keep track of another one. But a breeder she knew, had a bird she just had to see—one which he claimed would give her comfort. So, Joan was convinced, and Lady Hildegard—Lady for short, came to live at her house when she was four months old and weighed about five ounces. She would eventually grow into a medium sized parrot with stunningly beautiful colors. Here's what Joan said about the first time she met lady:

"Hold her," the breeder said. "She's a companion bird." But I hesitated. Anybody with any experience with birds at all knows that you need to work your way into their trust. And, at the same time, you have to work them into being comfortable with your presence, your voice commands, and certainly your hands. Very cautious now, I frowned a bit. "No, take her," the breeder said. "She loves people."

Lady ran up my arms, rubbed her head across my cheek, and surfed down the front of me. Then she grabbed onto my fingers, licking and tasting as she went, learning everything there was to know about me that meant anything to her; she clearly wanted someone who would be soft with her, accepting, and patient. Definitely patient. It seemed a fit.

We bundled Lady up against the sharp autumn wind and took her out into the dark. There would be chaos in the car, I knew. Everything in her life right now was new and frightening. She was with strange people outside the house and being moved from one place to another in the dark. These were not small things for a tiny bird to negotiate. I expected hysteria, anger, self-defense, fear. Nothing short of total resistance.

I could feel little Lady squirming inside the blanket and prepared myself for the worst. She might drop onto the floor where I couldn't see her. Or she might bite anything within range. Or she might jump from me to the driver and then we could be really in trouble. Instead, she simply popped her little head up out of the cover I had her cloaked in and took a long, solemn look at everything. The lights of oncoming cars mesmerized her for awhile. But then, eventually, she tired of those, curled up against my neck, and went to sleep. Clearly, this companion bird had found herself a companion—and so had I. (Two Dogs and a Parrot-What Our Animal Friends Can Teach Us About Life)

We are companions to one another. And as a side bar, when Pastor Tim arrives, ask him about his pet birds—some of his companions too. We need these small creatures in our lives, and they need us—often times just to survive. But too often, we fail to see these small wonders, right around us. We perhaps need to be more disciplined about taking notice, rather than being totally consumed by our "peopled existence."

I was intrigued to read in the paper this week about the 30X30 nature challenge. It is meant to connect people to what nature offers and to inspire greater appreciation for the natural environment, by spending 30 minutes in nature for the 30 days in June. So, OK, since we may be starting

late, then make it 25 minutes in nature for the remaining 25 days, being outside and not necessarily accomplishing anything. Leaving the boxes to be unpacked, the work project to be accomplished—leaving it all to sit for awhile longer. We live in a very device-attached world and need to more regularly unplug and experience the natural world. The article told of one woman who went into her backyard and was checking out her new birdfeeder. A beautiful bird that she'd never noticed before was on the feeder and she found herself looking it up on her phone and reading & watching videos about the bird. By the time she looked up from her phone, the finch was gone—it flew away. Instead of just being present to the presence of the bird, she was still connected to her phone. (*The Journal Sentinel*, 6/1/16)

Whether it's our own backyard, the park down the street, or the church gardens, we don't have to go far to take notice of the small creatures of our world. And I believe the more we take notice, the more love and respect we will have for all these creatures, creatures for whom God already has great love.

As Brian McLaren has written this about the created order: "We walk this road of life to behold the wonder and savor this aliveness. To remind ourselves who we are, where we are, what's going on here and how beautiful, precious, holy, and meaningful it all is. This is what it means to be alive."

--Sue Burwell