

Isaiah 40:27-31
Consider the Birds: the Vulture
June 9, 2024
Rev. Kelley Becker

This series has taught me that people have strong feelings about birds. I have a friend in IL who watches this service every week online and she despises birds, which I didn't know until I announced this series. I have another friend who loves birds. She was just gifted the coolest bird feeder. Here are a few pictures from the feeder that I'm sharing with her permission.

Bird camera scroll on screen

It has a camera mounted on it. She has an app on her phone that alerts her when a bird is at the feeder. When I messaged her to ask permission to use her pictures, she told me she had upgraded the app and now, it can record longer videos and identify the birds. I had the birdfeeder in my Amazon cart and talked myself out of getting it in an effort to follow through with my commitment to stop spending so much money. I may circle back on that.

My interest in birds is recent. About 4 years ago, I decided hummingbirds were cool and bought feeders for our yard. Since then, I've found that I enjoy almost all birds. Their presence has a calming effect on me. When I was younger, the sound of the birds in the morning made me instantly angry. Now, their birdsongs are a gift I look forward to every day. Someday, I hope to have the patience to learn which songs go with which birds. In the meantime, I enjoy watching them. We have a pair of cardinals in our backyard that sit on the fence every morning. There is a woodpecker in the tree by the side of our house. And of course...the hummingbirds. So many beautiful birds live in our backyard. But these birds are not the topic of this sermon.

The vulture is. Unlike the birds on my friend's feeder and the ones we watch in our yard, the vulture is rarely described as beautiful. In her book, *Consider the Birds*, Debbie Blue describes vultures like this, "New world vultures projectile vomit into the face of anything that startles them. They eat excrement (especially human) and dead bodies. They defecate over their own legs. Most vultures are bald. This allows them to stick their entire heads inside a carcass without feathers to foul with blood and rotting flesh."¹ Charming.

Apparently, according to Blue, researchers studying vultures went to band some baby vultures and were so overwhelmed by the smell of the nest that they passed out. However, she admits, that based on the vulture's reputation this seems plausible, it could very well be an internet myth. On the other hand, a member mentioned on Facebook that the vulture roost smells awful, and I believe her. Yuck. All this neatly

¹ Blue Debbie, *Consider the Birds: A Provocative Guide to Birds of the Bible*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 2013), 66.

corresponds with most of the responses to the social media prompt I shared at the start of worship. Of course, the Holy Spirit vulture has a completely different vibe.

It's true, many of us see vultures as a sign of death and we don't like death. Truthfully, we probably also don't like the idea that there is a bird in the air who would gladly eat us should we meet an untimely demise. And neither did the ancient Hebrew people. This is precisely why proper burial was important to them. They did not want vultures and other scavengers to use their bodies as food. In the book of Deuteronomy, the biblical author claims God told the Israelites that if they didn't honor the covenant, "thy carcass shall be meat." That was a horrible threat and one of the worst curses you could throw at someone in the ancient world. In the story of David and Goliath, Goliath tried to intimidate David by telling him, "Your body shall be food for all birds of the air." While vultures are not mentioned specifically, they are implied.

And in the New Testament, in both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, vultures are mentioned specifically. The authors attribute these words to Jesus, "Wherever the corpse is, there eagles will gather." That is the New Revised Standard Version translation. However, in other translations, "eagles" is more appropriately translated as "vultures." If we look at the context of the sentence, the word "vultures" is a better fit. The disciples had just asked Jesus a question and this verse was part of his answer. Jesus was saying, "You will know...it's obvious." Vultures come around when there is a death. Eagles do not. Why did translators use "eagles" then you may be asking. Eagles is a little less gross, but unfortunately, the author's point is lost. Vultures and death go together, not eagles and death.

Today, we use the word vulture to describe people who take advantage of the misfortunes of others. Marvel Comics has six supervillains called "the Vulture." In the book *Babar the King*, the animals are assigned jobs. The vulture is the butcher.² There is an African proverb that says, "When vultures surround you, try not to die." And author Suzy Kassem wrote, "Fear the vulture and the vulture will come. Fear nothing, and you are the vulture." Vultures have quite a reputation.

Recall that last week we talked about the contrast between how some traditions view pelicans as symbols of piety while others see them as symbols of fertility and sensuality. The vulture has a similar story. It turns out, vultures don't represent death in all traditions and cultures. According to Blue, ancient Egyptians saw vultures as "a great mother god'---a huge, protective, high-flying goddess whose enormous wingspan could encompass and enfold everything." Her name was Nekhbet and in the *Book of the Dead*, it says she was the "Mother of Mothers who existed from the beginning and gave birth to us all."³

² Blue, 68.

³ Blue, 69.

The ancient Egyptians understood the vulture as only female, probably because some kinds of vultures look the same whether male or female. When Nekhbet wanted to have a baby, she opened her wings and the wind impregnated her. Does that sound familiar? Does that sound like part of the traditional Christian narrative? It should. In medieval bestiaries, the vulture is compared to the Virgin Mary. One ancient bestiary writer asks, "What can they say, those who are accustomed to ridiculing our priests when they hear that a virgin conceived?... They consider impossible for the Mother of God what is not denied as possible for vultures."⁴ Maybe vultures aren't so bad after all.

Some responses to the vulture prompt on social media indicated that some of us lean toward a more positive view of vultures. Responders used words like:

Teamwork

Sweet and adorable when tame

Necessary

Misunderstood

Industrious

Powerful

Fastidious

Essential workers

Beautiful when soaring

The same person who said "beautiful when soaring," was also the person who confirmed that their nests smell disgusting. Vultures help us remember that beauty is everywhere and beauty looks different in everything and everyone. We live in a world that tries to tell us what is beautiful. There are some problems with that and one of them is that the world (capitalism) can't settle on anything. What is beautiful today wasn't so 50 years ago.

In the 1970s, this is what we were told was beautiful.

70s living room pic on screen

In the 80s it was this.

80s living room pic on screen

And the 90s.

90s living room pic on screen

Skipping ahead to today.

2024 living room pic on screen

Basically, the furniture, fixture, and paint manufacturers tell us what is beautiful right now. So it makes sense that it would change, otherwise, we wouldn't buy new stuff as often. How would your home look different if all that mattered was what you think is beautiful? I have felt garland with colorful balls in three windows instead of curtains and across the fireplace mantle. About this time last year, I decided I needed some whimsy in my life, so I hung up some colorful balls. They are delightful, though I am certain an interior designer would be horrified and tell me it's time to grow up.

⁴ Blue, 69-70.

Capitalism also tells us what makes people, especially women, beautiful. The clothing designers and the make-up and hair product manufacturers have shown us that beauty is thin, white, blonde, and wrinkle-free. They make a lot of money selling beauty to us. We learn from TV, magazines, and TikTok what we are supposed to look like. This impacts how we see ourselves and how we see each other. And it turns out, Artificial Intelligence is learning too. For years, Dove Beauty has tried to influence the culture of the beauty industry. Granted, they are hoping to make money as well. They have chosen models of all shapes and sizes, skin colors, ethnicities, and abilities in their commercials for the last 20 years. Their latest commercial featuring what AI has learned about beauty is fascinating. I want to show it in case you haven't seen it. The link to the video clip we are about to show is in the comments of this broadcast for our online worshipers. Play:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=relQAmpbO8>

God bless the ones who are changing the narrative around beauty. Little ones are watching and we must teach them that beauty is everywhere, in every kind of person, every kind of bird, and in everything. We just have to practice seeing and noticing it. There is something truly miraculous about stumbling on beauty unexpectedly. I mean...we all expect the sunset to be beautiful, but there are times when conditions are just right, and it is spectacular.

Nature is full of unexpected beauty in the form of bees' butts,
Or weeds
Spiders
bats.
And even vultures.

There is beauty everywhere even when we can't see it right away. And when we can't, we need to change our perspective. Some of the social media responses got at the beauty of vultures. They clean up our world, without them, there would be a lot of dead things lying around. I learned this week that due to a drug that was fed to livestock, the countries of India, South Africa, Nepal, and Pakistan experienced a rapid decline in the vulture population and things got ugly. So now there are vulture restaurants that provide farm-raised, safe meat for the vultures and their populations are bouncing back.⁵ While vultures can be a little creepy, especially if death freaks you out, we need them.

We, and our Jewish ancestors, feel threatened by "thy carcass shall be meat," but that isn't true for all cultures. "In Tibet, where the ground is rocky and the firewood scarce, burying and burning bodies has never been much of an option. The Buddhists there practice jhator, which means 'alms to the birds,' also known as sky burial. The monks chant mantras, incense is burned, and finally the bodies are laid out ceremoniously to be eaten by the vultures. This is not seen as a bad thing at all, but rather the last act of

⁵ Blue, 78.

generosity---in death, one provides food to sustain the living beings. It's an act of compassion and detachment from self."⁶

Being willing to change our perspective to understand the world and the people around us is an important character trait for us to cultivate. I mentioned a couple of places in the Hebrew Bible in which vultures, though not named, are featured...God's threat to the Israelites and Goliath's threat to David. There are other places where the vulture is named...though again, some translations, use the word "eagle" instead. But that is a translation choice. How would it change our perspective if Isaiah 40: 28-31 read:

²⁸ Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
²⁹ He gives power to the faint
and strengthens the powerless.
³⁰ Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted,
³¹ but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like vultures;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.

A vulture's wings are huge, but it is not by power and muscle that they fly. It is the uneven warming of the air that allows the vulture to soar to great heights. The warmer air expands, becoming less dense than the surrounding air mass, creating an airwave. Many birds ride these airwaves, but usually below 500 feet. Vultures fly effortlessly at 10,000 ft...they just open their wings and ride the currents. They fly higher than almost any other bird, in fact, there was a vulture that collided with an airplane at 37,000 ft.⁷ Looking back at Isaiah, if we were to metaphorically "mount up on wings like vultures," it would mean that we would not be relying on our own strength and power, but on the power of what Blue calls, "communal energy," generated by the wind and the sun. I believe that is closer to what God has in mind for us. We weren't created to be independent, to do everything by ourselves. Sometimes we don't like to admit it, but we are supposed to depend on each other, on this planet, and the Holy. We are all part of each other. Beautifully and perfectly, being who we were created to be together.

You have homework this week, friends. Look for and find beauty in unexpected places. And send me a picture or a description. I won't make you share it with the class unless

⁶ Blue, 79.

⁷ Blue, 73.

you want to. I will say, I am so lucky...every week, I get to stand here and see the beauty that is each one of you. This is way better than having a birdfeeder with a camera.

Amen.