

This week I have said a lot of things I never expected to say, words I haven't in 10 years of ordained ministry uttered. When asked this week what I would be preaching on I shared enthusiastically, "Oh, you know, Ostriches!" I am going to let you in on a little secret this morning friends. Doing ministry with Kelley Becker has a way of keeping you on your toes. I remember when she asked what I thought about a sermon series on the birds of the bible, based off the book *Consider the Birds*, by Debbie Blue, and I told her that I don't consider the birds, that I pay no attention to the birds, much less consider them, and that I didn't really care to consider them. It's not that I have anything against birds really, they just aren't something I am overly enthusiastic about beyond making sure the barn swallows on our front porch find a different place to build their muddy nests. I am not a monster though. Robins and other birds have free reign to the few places our gutters overlap creating a nice roof for mother birds. Those nests always get to stay.

Anyway, as you can tell, I didn't say no, because who says no to Kelley, and so here we are this morning to talk about Ostriches. Before we get too far down that road, I want to clarify that there wasn't a chapter on cute little penguins, or gorgeous flamingos, or even Kelley's beloved hummingbird. So, why not ostriches?

In all reality friends, the book is fascinating. There is an interplay between scripture and life and birds and I know that today and throughout the rest of the series we are going to have the opportunity to unpack texts in new ways and to imagine the vastness and beauty of God and her creation. It turns out Kelley was right, but we don't need to all go at once to tell her I said that. And I know I am talking to a room full of readers, so I would encourage you to wait to pick up the book until the series is over so you can enjoy the series and then take a deeper dive later.

So, Ostriches, shall we?

Ostriches are enormous birds- six to nine feet tall - and weigh as much as 350 pounds. They have hooflike feet with only two toes, one of which has a very witchy looking black claw. They have spindly legs that look like sticks until you get to the thighs which look almost like an Olympic runner's thighs might. Then, suddenly, this big wide body puffs out covered in feathers. Out of the middle of the feather puff emerges a snakelike neck that can twist and bend and swivel. Finally, there is a tiny head with massive eyes. Ostriches whistle, snort, and grunt, as well as make a sound that sounds like the roar of a lion. The one fact everyone seems to know about an ostrich is that it sticks its head in the sand, but it turns

out that only people do that. Ostriches however don't – apparently this myth has been carried all the way from the first century from Pliny's *Natural History*. The other seemingly well-known fact is that the ostrich is not very smart, but we will get to that later.

The reference to ostriches is found in the book of Job. As a recap Job is a text that raises many more questions than it does answers and, in that, is its genius. Nothing is certain – neither the character of God nor of Job. Even the style of the text, vacillating as it does between poetry and prose, ensures that nothing is predictable or easily explained. It is a story in which God grants Satan the freedom to test Job's faith and in turn Job suffers great losses and endures much suffering. Which of course, causes Job and his friends to wrestle with the ways in which God is at work or not in the world.

In chapter 30:28-29, Job complains,

²⁸ I go about in sunless gloom;

I stand up in the assembly and cry for help.

²⁹ I am a brother of jackals

and a companion of ostriches.

Job is lamenting that he used to be important, wealthy, and respected, but now has lost everything and must befriend the ostriches. Biblical Scholar Abigail Pelham offers a different take on the story of Job. She argues that while we often read Job as a tragedy it could be read too, as a comedy. You see before he complained about being with his jackal and ostrich friends what Job is lamenting about isn't his suffering, or even really the loss of his family and friends. By verse 30, the MAIN thing, the BIG thing, Job is dismayed about is his loss in status. When Job says he has become like a companion to the ostriches, it is during a lengthy complaint where he explains his former greatness in detail. Debbie Blue recounts, "Job used to be great, and people thought he was great – one of the greatest men ever. In fact, she says, "he was so much greater than most people that when he walked through the streets, the crowds parted for him and fell into a hushed silence. Job claims his words were like rain to these people whom, he soon makes clear he didn't have much respect for. He "disdained" their fathers too much to set them with the dogs of his flock. Job further speaks of his ostrich friends in chapter 39.

The wings of the ostrich flap joyfully,

though they cannot compare

with the wings and feathers of the stork.

She lays her eggs on the ground

*and lets them warm in the sand,
unmindful that a foot may crush them,
that some wild animal may trample them.
She treats her young harshly, as if they were not hers;
she cares not that her labor was in vain,
for God did not endow her with wisdom
or give her a share of good sense.
Yet when she spreads her feathers to run,
she laughs at horse and rider.*

The ostrich passage in Job, claims that ostrich are cruel to their young and that “God has made her forget wisdom and given her no share in understanding”. So you see...it’s a little funny that now Job whines that he is a companion to the ostrich. That this man of great greatness who is so super great, is now the companion of the ostrich who he describes as a big stupid bird.

But maybe we shouldn’t take Job’s word for it. This week, because of the wonderful work of author and pastor Debbie Blue I have learned a great deal about these big stupid birds. Now, that part, isn’t entirely not true. The size of the gray matter in their head is smaller than the size of the matter in ours, but they have survived as a flightless bird on a continent with every imaginable predator and competitor for 120 million years, so maybe we and Job shouldn’t judge? Ostriches survive in Africa, an enormous continent with lions, jackals, hyenas, and people. They live in wide open spaces with no where to hide. The behavior of ostriches is highly evolved and refined. The Discovery Channel had a film where they were clocking the speed of an ostrich on a treadmill. The scientist mentioned that its legs are similar to that of a T-Rex, but that the ostrich is faster at speeds of forty four miles per hour for up to 30 minutes.

Ostriches live and travel in groups of 5 to 50. There is usually one male in the group who mates with various females, but it forms a pair bond with only one, who becomes the alpha female. She is the one who leads the nomadic pack. Sometimes lone males join the group during mating season. Eventually all the females lay their eggs, but they do so in one group nest of about 20 eggs, which the main pair takes turns incubating. The main female somehow knows which eggs belong to her, and she makes sure those stay towards the middle of the nest, but both she and the male are careful to cover as many eggs as possible. Once the chicks hatch no preference is shown for whose is whose. The main couple raises all the babies with great care. This communal life works well for the ostrich. Together they are able to watch out for one another. When they can’t outrun a

predator they lay down in the sand, which is probably where the myth came from, but is actually a smart trick because they are able to camouflage themselves to look like a mound of sand rather than food. They might not have big brains like you or me, or Job, but there they are surviving in the wild when all odds are against them.

So if we could, I would tell Job that he's got it all wrong about these big dumb birds. I would tell him, and so would Blue, that perhaps what he needs is a change in perspective. It seems in the story God agrees, because it is here that God finally swoops in, the text says like a whirlwind, and God says, "Where were you little man, when I birthed the world?" God speaks not of creating and ordering the cosmos but instead speaks about the creation story as a Mothering God who gave birth to life. This weird, beautiful, diverse life. And then God points out to Job, all of the wonderful and weird things God has birthed – ostriches, vultures, goats, and the sea. The text has the sea bursting forth from God's womb. And in all of it, God seems to be marveling at the very thing she has created. God marvels at the wild beasts at play and the snorting horses. The original hearers of Job understood that the sea was a symbol for the forces that threaten humanity and God in Job is swaddling the sea like a baby. God goes on and on about all the wildlife as though God loves it –ALL of it. This image of God is maybe my favorite. You see this image of God is more like a mother who is admiring her children, rather than the patriarch demanding obedience.

This God is just pleased with each creature's mere existence. God isn't admiring each creature because they are focused on God and hold God as their center, no, God just seems to like them, and to be enamored with them whether they pay any attention to God or not.

And while all of this is taking place, Job is still bemoaning his fall from greatness, and bless him, I get it. Change is hard. Especially a change in perspective. I want to matter too. And sometimes I too get hyper focused and don't hear what new thing someone who loves me is trying to say or show me. God in Job, is modeling a different way of being. What many biblical scholars believe is that God is offering grace in this text. Blue argues, that maybe what God is saying is this – "Look, stop focusing on yourself for a minute, look at it all. No really....Look at it....It is all so beautiful and complex and mysterious and way way bigger than you. Way bigger than you. Consider the birds, man! Stop being so consumed with yourself."

In the past I have read this text as if God is brushing Job off. As God being inconsiderate or unkind. We often read it as if God is being at least slightly

punitive. But what if it's not that at all? What if God is trying to diminish Job, and us, as a way to free us. Perhaps God is saying, consider what is not you and what is beyond you.

Blue says, "We are large brained mammals. Cool. We do things other mammals can't – but look at the sea, man! Abigail Pelhelm says that God has shown Job "a world different than anything he could have imagined: terrible and difficult, but also wildly beautiful and madly loved." She goes on to say " God's world is wild and beautiful, and God shows Job and his friends what the world is like, and what she shows them, is so much better than what they have come up with on their own.. "Here is where you really live" God tells Job, You do not live in that narrow world you thought you occupied. That's not real. That's something you made up. Come out here and be free, as you are meant to be.

Maybe just maybe that invitation is there for us too. To live and love and work and just be in a world that God birthed into creation. A world that God is continuing to nurse and swaddle, and see to its upbringing. And maybe the same could be true of us. That God, just really likes us too. Flawed and messy, big brained or small brained, imperfect, shameful and every single label we think we could give ourselves today and all days. God invites us to look beyond ourselves and see that all the ways God is at work in the world, she is at work in us too, nurturing, and swaddling, and loving us into our fullest beings. It seems to be enough for the ostriches. And today, that's enough for us too. Amen.

Ostriches are said not to be the brightest. They have every quality of a large, dumb bird, save that of flight, which makes other birds exciting. With the exception of penguins, which are given the green light for their inability to fly (namely because they appear to be tuxedoed and cute), birds that cannot fly are like cattle who do not yield steak, milk, or leather. How can a bird with no discretion, no wisdom, no sense of might or pride, ever survive? Natural selection seems to work against them. Everything about them screams loudly, "This animal ought to die." And yet, it doesn't, because of the very way that God created it and the way that He sustains it in spite of itself.

Perhaps you deal frequently with students of a similar stripe (or feather). They make decision after decision that, in our finite wisdom, leads us to the obvious conclusion that they have no chance of survival in the dog-eat-dog world of the teenager. Yet, rather than resorting to fatalism, we ought to consider Job 39:13-18. This verse provides a strange amount of comfort through its portrayal of a bird devoid of all understanding.

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though they cannot compare
with the wings and feathers of the stork.
She lays her eggs on the ground
and lets them warm in the sand,
unmindful that a foot may crush them,
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she cares not that her labor was in vain,
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The character of Job is in one moment patient and resigned and, in the next, angry, frustrated and questioning of the God whom he sees as shaping the whole of creation. The question of life as a blessing or as a curse within the whole of creation is cleverly stretched throughout the narrative. God, humanity and fate are all given intriguing roles within this cosmic interplay. And the catalyst to this unfolding drama is the wistful dealing of heavenly beings and Satan, the Accuser –

The Accuser is given divine permission to put Job to the test by messing around with his hitherto blessed, uncomplicated life.

When the deity finally deigns to answer, we encounter some of the most beautiful creation poetry used to bring perspective to the place of humanity within the whole of the universe. The nature of the soul, the extent and majesty of the universe and the existence of good and evil are all wrestled without resolution in the book of Job. There is acknowledgement that human knowledge of God's world is pathetically incomplete but the story and the part of Job and God in that remains ambiguous to the end. It seems the more we learn, the less we know. This it has been and ever shall be.