

September 15, 2019 “Consider”

Wisdom is the byword for today’s passage in Scripture that opens a conversation about what humans consider worth knowing and valuing in the world, especially regarding animals. Too often animals are seen as nothing but our servants, entertainment, subjects of scientific experimentation, or food sources. Earlier in this service, we had a time of reflection for animals currently in our lives, or who have been memorable in our lifetime. Animals can touch our hearts. I want to tell a couple stories about two dogs, who graced humanity with their courage, compassion and conviction roughly 20 years ago.

Salty was trained as a guide dog in early 1998 by Guiding Eyes for the Blind in Yorktown Heights, New York. Part of his training included taking trips on the New York City Subway and getting used to traffic in the Bronx. Omar Rivera was introduced to Salty by his instructor, Caroline McCabe-Sandler. When the attacks occurred on September 11, Salty and his owner, Omar Rivera, found themselves on the 71st floor. Rivera was working at the headquarters of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, in Tower 1 of the World Trade Center. After refusing to leave Rivera's side, Salty and Rivera's supervisor led him to safety. About halfway down, a co-worker, trying to help, tried to take Salty's lead but the dog refused to leave Omar.

Roselle was born in San Rafael, California, on March 12, 1998, at the Guide Dogs for the Blind. She was moved to Santa Barbara, California, to be raised by Kay and Ted Stern. Roselle and her owner, Michael Hingson, first met on November 22, 1999. She was Hingson's fifth guide dog. Roselle was asleep under her owner's desk on the 78th floor in Tower 1 of the World Trade Center when the attack commenced. She was awakened by the plane impacting some fifteen floors above them. Roselle calmly led Hingson to stairwell B, despite the smoke, confusion and noise surrounding her.

She led her owner and 30 other people down 1,463 steps out of the tower. After descending over half the distance, they passed the firemen who were heading up, who Roselle stopped to greet. The descent took just over an hour. Just after they exited the tower, Tower 2 collapsed, sending debris flying. Hingson later said, "While everyone ran in panic, Roselle remained totally focused on her job, while debris fell around us, and even hit us, Roselle stayed calm." Once clear, Roselle led her owner to the safety of a subway station, where they helped a woman who had been blinded by falling debris. Once they arrived home, Roselle immediately began playing with her retired guide dog predecessor, Linnie, as if nothing important had happened.

Both Salty and Roselle accomplished heroic feats which were later recognized when they were awarded the Dickin Medal by the British charity the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals. Roselle went on to be posthumously named American Hero Dog of the Year 2011 by the American Humane Society, and has a book written about her.

The role of the Church in the twenty-first century, according to Thomas Berry, is to help shape a future that is based on human-Earth relations. “The future of the other two relations [human-divine and inter-human] depends upon this third relation, our human capacity to recognize our place in the structure of the universe and to fulfill our role within this setting”. Berry states that our “ultimate concern” must be “the integrity of the universe upon which the human depends in such an absolute manner”. Berry coined the term "Ecozoic Era" to describe the period he would like to see emerge when humans "would be present to the planet in a mutually enhancing manner. We need to establish ourselves in a single integral community including all component members of planet Earth”.

This can only happen, says Berry, when humans come to see their place and role in the universe as completely dependent on the habitats, flora, and fauna of Earth, all of which have intrinsic value not dependent on human needs or wants. Accepting this limited role is the first, and most difficult, step that humans must take. The next step for healing the damaged planet is based on an operating

principle of creating continuity between the human and the non-human in every aspect of human life, from institutions and professions to programs and activities. If these two steps are taken, Berry sees hope for humanity's and the planet's survival.

There is much to reflect on in our scripture reading today. We can reflect on Job, but there's also a passage in Luke where Jesus says, "Consider how the lilies grow." One word that jumps out to me is "consider" Jesus urges the people to "Consider," things. In Greek, the word is "*katanoeo*". It means "perceive, remark, observe, understand, fix one's eyes and attention on." In Job 39, God asks the man if he "knows" about the animals in the world around him. It is *Yada* in Hebrew. It means to "know, learn to know, use one's mind, to be acquainted with." The function of Wisdom in this week's reading, then, is to help us to perceive God's Creation in a way that is not self-serving, but self-decentering. When do you feel or experience discomfort in your perception of the animal world, and how do you feel called to respond? It might be about puppy mills, chicken farms, the treatment of animals at zoos and aquariums, and so on. So how do you offer God's grace through your actions in the world you encounter?

What would God's grace look like for humans and animals? For me, it came from a vegetarian friend who once gave me an option between giving up meat and completely throwing up my hands in frustrated despair at my own meat-aholism.

“Just try one day a week without eating meat,” she suggested. A meat Sabbath! A day of rest for my body from having to process meat-based protein. A day to eat lower on the food chain. A day when one animal will not have to die in order for me to live. Wisdom spoke through my friend that day, I recalled, as I stood before the plastic-wrapped chicken on the metal rack. I pulled my cart away, and turned back to the produce aisle.

I find it significant that today’s passage deals with the complexity of human life, concerns and suffering and how it ends up as passages that guide us into contemplations about creation. Or maybe to spin it around, a passage that guide us into contemplations about creation ends up being some of the most significant about concerns, worry and suffering. When Job has been agonizing over his life and his suffering, his protestations that life is simply not fair and after his friends have all had their go at explaining, or blaming, God drops into the conversation with a series of questions about animals:

Who provides food for the raven?

Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?

Do you watch when the doe bears her fawn?

Who let the wild donkey go free?

Can you hold it to the furrow with a harness?

Do you give the horse its strength?

Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom?

Referring to that obscure Luke passage again, when Jesus' followers are getting stressed about the practicalities of life and where all their necessities would come from, Jesus tells them to consider the ravens and consider the lilies. Not to look at them, or listen to them, or stop and smell the roses, but to consider them. It's as if the creation around us, the animals, the birds, the smallest and the greatest can jolt us into a better perspective – a more true-to-God perspective – of ourselves.

This is not to suggest that all the things that go on in our lives are small or insignificant, but we are invited into being more reflective and gaining perspective. For some people this deeper perspective becomes a life changing experience that directs them into a new career, or a new way of living. Some children, when growing up on a farm, see the birth of a calf or lamb, and are so touched by the blessing of creation, that they grow up to become veterinarians or to maintain the family farm, to extend God's care to other animals.

For others, like Job, the call to stop and pay attention to a world beyond himself, creates a sense of deep acceptance of life and a way of relating that is hope filled. In the encounter with the wonders of creation, Job the questioner becomes Job the questioned. Job has been spending his time gazing into a mirror

and wondering about himself. As the mirror is removed, Job has the capacity to see the wondrous creation of which he is one part. Important, but certainly not central.

In knowing his place, Job has the chance to know himself.

Have you stood in the middle of great prairies? I have.

Have you sat on the majestic back of a camel, horse, or elephant? And truly appreciated the gift they are to our creation? I have.

Have you stood at the foot of a mountain, or intentionally gazed longingly at those on our horizon here in Vancouver and really considered the marvelous hand that created them?

Have you ever, as children do, marvelled at the scurrying ability of a colony of ants? The sticky feet of caterpillars, the different “chirps” of birds in the air?

Have you ever said, “Goodnight Moon”.

Have you stopped and watched the bees flitting from flower to flower?

Have you considered the way that your pets move?

Have you carefully watched a guide dog with its owner?

I think possibly the most significant element of the two passages I’ve referred to, is not that the disciples or Job end up understanding the sparrows, or the donkey, or the horse. But actually that they don’t understand. They are not asked to understand. They are asked to consider, to stop and wonder and in the wondering, to learn of God. When we celebrate new life in baptism, one of the

things that we do is say together the words of The New Creed. “We believe in God, who has created and is creating... to live with respect in Creation”. There is a link – a direct link – between our faith in God and the affirmation that God is Creator.

One philosopher – Wendell Berry (yes, another Berry) – has said that what we need to do is learn to experience our dependency on other things with gratitude. To accept with thanks that we are not independent, but that we are all interwoven in this creation. Berry says “we are living from mystery – from creatures we did not make and powers we cannot comprehend”. Creatures of joy. Creatures of wonder. Creatures of companionship. Creatures of mystery. Consider these creatures. Ponder their wonder. Celebrate their companionship. And live together in the greatness of God’s mystery of which we are all part. Amen.