

THE GOD OF ANIMALS, I: THE OLDEST PROFESSION
A SERMON PREACHED AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH GREENWICH
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THE LESSON FOR THE DAY—GENESIS 2:4b-24
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A while back I came across a novel by Aryn Kyle called *The God of Animals* and I had a *eureka* moment. That would be a good sermon series, I thought to myself. It's an eccentric homiletical idea. I doubt you've heard anything like it before. I haven't. But over and over the Bible uses animals to teach us about ourselves and about God.

The Bible is an ancient book, of course, not quite antediluvian, but almost. Its oldest materials date back to 1000 BC, and the canon was closed by the year 100 AD. Agrarian folk, the Bible's authors lived much closer to the earth than we do. They were shepherds and farmers and cattle ranchers, and kept intimate consort with the beasts who provided their livelihood and their calories, unlike us, who never observe the obscure and sometimes unpleasant ways our food journeys from pasture and orchard and henhouse to dinner table, and rarely see anything more exotic than a squirrel or rabbit or songbird, and, in Old Greenwich, the occasional coyote, or skunk, as Duncan the golden retriever found out to his utter dismay a while back.

The God of Animals. I'll try to restrain myself. I calculated that if I wanted to, I could go on for fifty weeks or more if I tried to tackle all the animal stories in the Bible, but I'll quit when I get tired of it, or you do. I'll also try to avoid the pitfall of shallow sentimentality. Most of you know how much I love my canine friends, but most of you also know how much I love Keen's Steakhouse, and my kangaroo-

leather Nike's. Something tells me I should be a cotton-wearing vegan, but so far I've been unable to tackle that spiritual discipline.

I'll also try to focus on the significant. If you parse the four simple words of the series title, you'll see that it's about God, not the animals. And this series will give me a chance to explore with you some Scriptural texts that might otherwise elude us if we slavishly followed the lectionary 52 weeks a year.

This text from Genesis chapter 2, for example. As I've told you many times before, there are two creation stories in the Bible. In the first story, God acts like an authoritative, left-brained engineer with PhD's in cosmology, geology, meteorology, biology, zoology, and anthropology. Creation snaps into place, in six carefully delineated steps, like the precise gears of a Swiss watch, so that by the seventh day, God can take a day off. Day One: Light. Day Two: The Sky. Day Three: The Plants. Day Four: the Sun and the Moon. Day Five: the fish and the birds. Day Six: the land animals and humankind. God has a blueprint, like Mark Thompson and A. Pappajohn. God has a business plan, like Steve Jobs or Bill Gates.

It is a masterpiece; it is perfect. God can't help but boast; perhaps pride has not yet become the first of the deadly sins. Six times God says it, "It was very, very good." Especially the last piece of the intricate puzzle, God's crowning achievement, the first man and the first woman, stamped with God's very

own image, finite replicas of God's infinite beauty. In the first creation account, you see, God remembers that if you're going to create beings that reproduce sexually, you'll need two genders.

This minor detail seems to have escaped God's notice in the second creation account. The second creation account is very different from the first. This creation story comes second in your Bibles but it comes first in history. This story is among the oldest, most primitive, most aboriginal material in the Hebrew Bible, from 1000 BC, three thousand years ago. In the second creation story, God is the Great Improviser, more jazz musician or dabbling artist than engineer or architect; God is Duke Ellington or Jackson Pollack.

In this story, God starts with the man, just the man, mind you, no woman yet. There stands the lonely man, all by himself in the barren wilderness, Adamah, which means earthling, groundling, dusty thing. And God says to Godself, "Oh shoot, I forgot to give the man a place to live and food to eat. Back to the drawing board. And God plants a lush garden with "every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good to eat."

But it's still not right. This story is very different from the first creation story, where creation hums and steps to a perfect rhythm like the choreographed robots of a Toyota assembly-line and God says six times "It's very good." In the second story God doesn't **boast**; God **apologizes**. "It's NOT good," says God. "I didn't get it right. Sorry. Let me try again." Creation is NOT good, and what's not good is that the man is alone. So back to the drawing board goes God again and God throws paint and color and ideas hither and yon across the almost-blank canvas and con-

cocts an astonishing panoply of shapes and forms and wings and fins and hoofs and paws and tentacles and antlers.

To change the metaphor, God takes creation's simplest molecular constituents—carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, and oxygen—and bends them into loops and links them together into chains of acids and twists the chain into a double helix of prolific possibilities that must have shocked even God Godself. It's miraculous, literally miraculous. From the same DNA building blocks you get Tyrannosaurus Rex and a sparrow, the dinosaurs closest living relative; raptors have more in common with chickens than with iguanas. I'll bet even God is surprised by all of this. Even God could never have predicted the caribou's towering rack or the tiger's sleek pelt or the manta ray's undulating wingspan. What twisted imagination concocted a giant squid sixty feet long and weighing a ton and then hid it from plain sight forever two miles down in the briny deep?

And then God parades the whole crawling, squirming, leaping, flying, diving zoo past the first man to see what he'll call them. "You're Fred," says Adam to the first cow. "Aardvark, orangutan, platypus, rhinoceros (Greek for *Horned Nose*), hippopotamus (Greek for *river horse*), wildebeest (which needs no translation)." Poor Adam: the bewildering, exhausting, apparently endless multiplicity taxes his vocabulary; he's only recently acquired the gift of language, you see.

This is Adam's first task on earth. The oldest profession is not what you think it is. At this point in **this** story, remember, there's only one gender, for humans at least, so sex, for hire or otherwise, hasn't even happened yet. Human-kind's earliest vocation is not what you think

it is. Humankind's earliest vocation is taxonomist; Adam's first task is to *name* his new friends, to bring to life with words these new companions God has graciously surrounded him with.

And the human being has been at this task ever since, trying to name the sprawling miscellany that sprang from God's prodigious imagination, framing the chaos by placing his friends in a structure of phylum, class, order, family, genus, and species. Over the years Adam and his descendants have named two million species—two million!—but we've apparently just gotten started because that appears to be a mere ten percent of the total and likely we'll never be finished. Twenty million animals! Twenty million names! Long Latin names, like *canis lupus familiaris*, because something as quotidian as 'dog' just won't do for so splendid a companion.

We'd better stay busy with the task of taxonomy, because some of the animals will be disappearing before we've even had a chance to name them. A while back *The New York Times* featured an article with a heartbreaking title: "A Fellow Mammal Leaves the Planet," about a fruitless six-week expedition along the Yangtze River to find the last remaining specimens of a white, almost blind, freshwater dolphin called the baiji, apparently undone by the Three Gorges Dam. It's been on earth for twenty million years, but now it's gone; they can't find a solitary specimen. I know this is sappy, but what would it feel like to be the last baiji, the last white, nearly blind, freshwater dolphin, cruising the Yangtze looking for a friend, like Will Smith in that Armageddon film *I Am Legend*? Farewell, baiji. Are we

"bulldozing the Garden of Eden?"¹ Earth Day passed so quietly this year I barely noticed it. You'd think we'd pay more attention, since our lives depend on it, not to mention the lives of our friends.

But back to the Scriptures. Adam's naming of the animals is not the end of the creation story, of course. Twenty million friends and creation's still not finished, still not perfect, still not good, by God's own admission, because there is still not a helper fit for man. He is still lonely. So God goes back to the drawing board yet again, and this time God comes up with woman, and whether she is merely an afterthought, or creation's *magnum opus* for which the man is merely the rough draft, the sexes have been arguing about ever since. And then creation is finished, then it is good, then it is perfect, because the man has a helper fit for him, and he is no longer lonely.

This text is not about the animals, of course. This text is about relationship. This text is about marriage: it tries to tell us why a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves unto his wife, and the two become one flesh. This text is about friendship. This text is about the gracious providence of the God whose heart *aches* over the creature's loneliness. This text is about the God who will not quit creating until the creature has companions to walk the way with him, until he has a helper fit for him.

How is God so intimately acquainted with the ache of loneliness—this omnipotent, omniscient, utterly self-sufficient Being? What does God know about loneliness? Is it possi-

¹Robert L. Pitman, "A Fellow Mammal Leaves the Planet," *The New York Times*, December 26, 2006.

ble that God knew about loneliness before we did? That's why we're here. That's why we were created—to keep God from being lonely. You know how James Weldon Johnson puts it: God says, “I'm lonely--I'll make me a world. And as far as the eye of God could see, darkness covered everything, blacker than a hundred midnights, down in a cypress swamp.”² I'm lonely; I'll make me a world. That's why we're here—because God got lonely.

Well, what do you think? Creation as the impulse to go out and look for company. Perhaps God knows, before us, the ache of loneliness. God knows how desperately we need our friends the animals. God knows how desperately we need each other. We are *built* for relationship; *life* is built for relationship.

With blossom and birdsong bursting forth everywhere and the drab colors of winter giving way to a bolder palette, this is the time of year we believe there was, and is, an Eden, which is neither myth nor fantasy, but gracious gift. Is it not by an unmerited extravagance that we know our God? To do just enough to meet the need, that is human, and natural, and rational. But to fling rainbows above the rain, and more on the domes of deep sea-shells, to throw beauty above the moon, to light the eye of the cat with a laser look, to make the necessary embrace of breeding beautiful as fire, not even the weeds to multiply without blossom, nor the birds without

²James Weldon Johnson, in a sermon entitled “The Creation,” in *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1922), p. 117.

music, there is the great kindness at the heart of things, the fountain of all goodness.³

Life is gift and birth windfall, and just to be here at all is a kind of eccentric privilege.⁴

³A rather free paraphrase of Robinson Jeffers' poem “The Excesses of God,” in *The Questing Spirit*, eds. Halford E Luccock & Frances Brentano (New York: Coward-McCann, 1947), p. 293

⁴This last sentence borrows and combines the words of Episcopalian priest John Claypool (from several different sermons) and G.K. Chesterton (from *Orthodoxy*).