

THE GOD OF ANIMALS, V: QUOTH THE RAVEN 'EVERMORE!'
A SERMON PREACHED AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH GREENWICH
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THE LESSON FOR THE DAY—I KINGS 17:1-7
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Ahab: Melville named a fictional Presbyterian sea-captain after him, but have you ever met a little Jewish boy named 'Ahab'? Probably not, because no Jewish momma ever wanted her son to grow up to be Ahab. Among a sad catalogue of awful Israelite kings, Ahab was the awfulest of them all. According to the Hebrew Bible, "Ahab did more to provoke the Lord's anger than all the kings who went before him."

From the Bible's perspective, the worst thing Ahab did was to fall in love with a sexy shiksa with a short skirt, ruby lips, and Betty Davis eyes. Her name was Jezebel:

And she'll tease you
She'll unease you
All the better just to please you
She's precocious
And she knows just what it
Takes to make a pro blush
All the boys think she's a spy,
She's got Bette Davis eyes.¹

All the boys think she's a spy, except King Ahab. He was completely smitten by her feminine charms, which wouldn't have been so bad had she not brought her tawdry foreign gods with her when she moved into Ahab's palace and introduced Israel to the alien rain-god Baal. Her father's name was Ethbaal, if that tells you anything about her religious loyalties.

Brave, ambitious, and shrewd (except for his taste in women), Ahab was doing all right for himself and for his country, but like the three presidential candidates in the United States just now, Ahab had a preacher problem. There was this otherwise obscure and extremely cranky prophet named Elijah who was the nagging pain in Ahab's neck, the swarm of wasps at his tea party, the horde of ants at his picnic.² Elijah's name means "Yahweh Is My God," if that tells you anything about *his* religious loyalties, so it stands to reason that Jezebel would not be Elijah's favorite person.

Elijah marches into Ahab's palace, casts a disparaging glance at Jezebel's fishnet stockings, and treats Ahab the King with the kind of respect Father Michael Pflieger reserves for Hillary Clinton. "You think this silly rain-god Baal is so great," says the cranky prophet to the astonished king, "You think this silly rain-god is so great, Yahweh is going to bring a three-year drought on the land just to show you that Baal is as impotent as a eunuch." That's not an exact translation, but it'll do. It will not surprise you to learn that after this blistering jeremiad, Elijah has to get out of town pronto, and I mean like yesterday.

Yahweh leads his loyal if reckless prophet to the banks of a wadi in the arid and desolate wilderness, which is not at first glance exactly where you want to be in the middle of a kill-

¹"Bette Davis Eyes," lyrics by Donna Weiss and Jackie DeShannon

²The 'ants' and 'wasps' imagery comes from Frederick Buechner, in *Peculiar Treasures* (New York: Harper Collins, 1979), p. 9.

ing drought, since wadis are feeble creeks the blazing sun quickly siphons off during dry periods. So there sits the sunburned, sweating prophet in a landscape of prickly cacti, shriveling shrubs, and bleached longhorn skeletons. It's so hot you could fry an egg on a rock but you don't have any eggs to fry. But just when the sun is about to suck Elijah's last hopes out of his withering frame, God sends an unlikely fleet of feathered friends to save him. Twice a day the ravens bring bread and meat to the stricken lonely prophet.

The raven is an unlikely savior for a prophet whose name means "Yahweh Is My God," because according to the Jewish Holiness Code, the raven is an unclean bird, and with good reason, because the raven is primarily a scavenger and will eat just about anything, primarily carrion. It is huge, four times the size of your average crow, and boasts feathers so black they shine with a rainbow iridescence.

Across every culture, the raven is almost universally a harbinger of death and bad tidings. In what might be the second most famous American poem of them all, Poe's hapless, heartbroken student wonders who is rapping, tapping at his chamber door.

Ghastly grim and ancient raven wandering
from the nightly shore
Tell me what thy lordly name is on the
Night's Plutonian shore!
Quoth the raven 'Nevermore!'

And the young man realizes that his black grief over the loss of his lover Lenore might be with him forever. The name of his grief is 'Nevermore!'

Ghastly grim and ancient raven, wandering from the nightly shore. Do you know what they used to call a flock of ravens? The collective noun for a group of ravens was once an "unkindness." You've got your *gaggle* of geese, your *brood* of chickens, and your *unkindness* of ravens.

The raven plays a prominent role in the mythology of many different cultures; it is often depicted as a trickster who plays jokes on the gods. The imagery of the raven as a trickster probably arises from the humanity's long awareness of how smart the raven actually is. Some ravens use tools, and one raven had a vocabulary of over sixty words.

A trapper in Saskatchewan watched a raven feeding on a carcass and noticed that she would occasionally roll over on her back as if dead. After he watched this for a while, the trapper finally noticed that she did this every time another raven flew overhead, pretending, I guess, that this meal was poison so the other ravens would give it a wide berth and she could have it all to herself.³

Ravens are no birdbrains. They say ravens are smarter than wolves, and even some breeds of dogs. I will not try to guess which dog breeds the raven is smarter than, but I have my suspicions about at least one of those breeds.

My son Michael and I found this out the hard way when we drove to the west coast three years ago with \$500 worth of new camping gear from LL Bean and bold dreams of exploring our wild native land. Unfortunately, we turned out to be less than cunning outdoorsmen. Our first chance to break in the new

³Bernd Heinrich, *Mind of the Raven* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), pp. 305-306.

stuff was at Dead Horse Canyon State Park, near Moab, Utah. Dead Horse Canyon is a deep and rocky rift with a narrow neck where in the nineteenth century some sorry rustler drove a herd of wild mustangs, blocked up the narrow entrance with dead tree limbs, left the horses there, and never came back; they all died of thirst. Apparently the ravens have owned Dead Horse Canyon ever since, and probably longer.

Everything was still in its original packaging and we unpacked the shiny new tent and the camp stove and the air mattress and everything, set up camp; we were rookies so it took us most of the day. We had all this cool dehydrated camping food and all the bells and whistles, which we left on the picnic table, still in sturdy boxes. And then we left to go exploring.

When we returned a couple of hours later, we discovered that the ravens were having quite a nice picnic on our campsite, thank you very much. One of them was drinking from a juice box—through the straw. Another was opening the child-proof cap on a bottle of Tylenol, and a third was using my corkscrew on a ten-year-old pinot noir I'd brought along to celebrate the special occasion. The detritus from this fiasco was everywhere. This brilliant feat of camping genius earned Michael and me a spot on the "No Admittance" List at Dead Horse Canyon State Park.

Tricksters, kleptomaniacs, harbingers of death and bad tidings. Elijah might have been the only person in history who was glad to meet a raven. But that's just the point, isn't it? Isn't that why the Jews have shared this beloved story of Elijah and his ravens for three thousand years? Doesn't it mean that God will use almost anything to keep the faithful safe?

Doesn't it mean that there are no depths to which God will not stoop to feed his starving children in the wilderness? Sometimes providence will flutter down upon you cloaked in raiment black as midnight but shining with an iridescent rainbow.

Elijah, you see, is one of the loneliest characters in the Bible. I can't think of anybody lonelier than Elijah. Part of it is his own damn fault. He's short on tact and long on blunt. He is arrogant and demanding. He has a short fuse. But we can feel sorry even for a pompous truth-teller with a bad temper when he's out there in the wilderness down to his last sip of water and last morsel of bread, at his wit's end, at the last extremity of hope.

Just then the ravens come to minister to him, and a little while later in the story Elijah will meet God Godself in that still, small voice the Reverend Laird talked to us about a couple of weeks ago. After the earthquake, wind, and fire, Elijah will complain to God, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts, but the Israelites have broken their covenant with you and thrown down your altars and killed all your prophets with the sword, and I alone am left." There's no one left but me, says Elijah to God. And says God to Elijah, "Get up, Elijah. Go on. It ain't over yet. I still have great plans for you. And there are still seven thousand in Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal." Open your eyes, Elijah. Open your eyes and see my ravens, my black scavenger Angels of Mercy. Open your eyes and find seven thousand in Israel who have not bowed the knee to alien gods. You are not alone. I am always with you.

"For God will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence," says the Psalmist. "God will cover you with

God's pinions, and under God's wings you will find refuge." Do you notice the avian imagery? Perhaps the Psalmist is thinking of Elijah and his ravens. "You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come nigh you...For God will give the angels charge of you, to keep you in all your ways. On their wings they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." On their WINGS, they will bear you up. Even the ravens are God's angels.

Do you have your own story of God's unexpected ravens? A while back I read this memoir by Martha Beck called *Expecting Adam*, about an accomplished, ambitious young couple with one child and two Harvard degrees apiece, now back at Harvard for yet more academic achievement. With a family, tremendous research demands, and high expectations for themselves, their lives are already incredibly stressed out, and then comes, as Ms. Beck puts it, *The Month It All Went to Hell*. She gets accidentally pregnant with her second child. First it's just a difficult pregnancy, nausea and dehydration, many days in bed when she's supposed to be working on her research. Then she discovers that the baby has Down's Syndrome.

The doctors and everybody else advise them to terminate the pregnancy, but then the sophisticated Harvard academic starts receiving these eerie spiritual messages. She feels a connection to her unborn child that is completely unique. Caring friends start appearing out of nowhere to help her shoulder the burden of her life. Martha Beck is a Mormon converted to atheism and she doesn't know

quite what to do with what she thinks of as messages from the spirit world, but they decide to keep the baby.

After Adam is born, she returns to her dissertation. As part of her sociology research she is interviewing a strange woman who has a master's degree in art history but makes her living as a school janitor. There is a large green parrot sitting on her shoulder, and suddenly the school janitor goes into something like a trance. "I have a message for you," she says. "A message?" says Ms. Beck. "Yes, it's from your son. He is half-way between the two worlds." "Well, perhaps I do have a son like that," says Ms. Beck. "You do," the woman answers flatly. "He wants to tell you not to worry so much. He wants to tell you that you will never be hurt as much by being open as you have been hurt by remaining closed up." "That's it?" says Ms. Beck. "That's it," says the parrot lady. "But what does it mean?" asks Ms. Beck. "Beats me. I just deliver the messages. Like Western Union. I don't ask what they mean."⁴

Martha Beck says, "Through all the twists and turns of my chaotic life, I've gotten the feeling that my life was completely under control, but not under *my* control."⁵

How long will we rest safely in the shelter of his wings? Quoth the raven, "Evermore!"

⁴Slightly adapted from Martha Beck, *Expecting Adam: A True Story of Birth, Rebirth, and Everyday Magic* (New York: Random House, 1999), pp. 3-8.

⁵Beck, p. 53.