

**THE GOD OF ANIMALS, VIII: THE CATTLE ON A THOUSAND HILLS
A SERMON PREACHED AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH GREENWICH**

JUNE 29, 2008

THE LESSON FOR THE DAY—PSALM 50

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In grandeur and dignity, we take a long step down from last week's King of the Beasts to this week's humble cow, which boasts neither beauty, brains, nor bravery. Without human protection, the beast would promptly go extinct; feral cattle last only a few generations before they all die off. Yet since 10,000 BC—the stone age, literally—human beings have considered the cow to be one of God's greatest gifts to the human family.

In his recent novel *What Is the What*, about the Lost Boys of Sudan on the run from the marauding janjaweed, Dave Eggers tells the creation myth of the Dinka tribe of Sudan. The first thing God creates is the Dinka tribe, the tallest, blackest, strongest members of the human family. Also, their women are the most beautiful, according to the Dinka. Then God turns to the Dinka and says, "Now that you are here in the most fertile corner of the earth, I can give you one more thing. I can give you this creature, which is called the cow. It is quite magnificent. It will give you milk and meat and prosperity."

Then God tests the Dinka to discover if they have adequately appreciated God's generosity. "I can give you this cow," says God, "or I can give you the What." "The What?" puzzle the Dinka. "What is the What?" "I cannot tell you," says God. "You have to choose." In this creation story, you see, God is kind of like Monty Hall on *Let's Make a Deal*. "You can have this new car, or you can have what-

ever's behind Door #1; it may be a new house, or it may be a case of pretzels." Wiser than other men and women, the Dinka look around them at the wonderful cattle, and can't imagine anything more magnificent, and choose the cattle over the What. Other human tribes, like the Muslims from northern Sudan, aren't so wise and grasp after the What, and get next to nothing.¹

A couple of weeks ago I noted that the English word 'cattle' derives from the Latin root *capita*, which means 'heads,' so that the phrase 'head of cattle' is really a redundancy. The word 'cattle' is related to words like 'chattel'—a personal possession—and 'capital'—stored wealth, excess funds banked or invested for the future. Cattle means, literally, moveable property, cash with legs, hedge funds on hooves. For many people in many lands even today, cattle is personal wealth. If you want to know how rich a person is, you don't look at the size of his stock portfolio; you look at the size of his herd. You can even purchase a bride with cattle.

It's not surprising, then, that cattle feature prominently in one of the more obscure but also more interesting, and, I want to suggest, humorous psalms in the Hebrew Psalter. Psalm 50's major claim to fame was that until

¹Dave Eggers, *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2006), pp. 61-63.

a few years ago, it was one of those scripture passages you could not read to a Confirmation class of eighth graders, because in the old Revised Standard version of the Bible, Psalm 50:8 read, “I will accept no bull from your house.” If you read that verse to a classroom-full of 13-year-olds, you could guarantee that they would start snorting Pepsi through their noses while guffawing over a God who would actually say, “I will accept no bull from you,” and then they would spend the next week quoting that verse to each other whenever a friend said something suspicious.

Thankfully, about twenty years ago, when Bruce Metzger, my beloved and revered Bible Professor at Princeton Seminary, became one of the editors of a new translation of the Bible, The New Revised Standard Version, Psalm 50:8 was one of the first passages he went after. In the New Revised Standard Version, Psalm 50:8 reads “I will not accept a bull from your house,” a very small, very simple emendation which nevertheless has made life a lot easier for Sunday School and Confirmation Class teachers.

Pardon the pun, but in Psalm 50, God has a beef with God’s people. It’s not that God’s people are reluctant or unwilling to revere or worship or praise their Maker; it’s that they’re worshipping with the wrong attitude. They don’t neglect their worship; they’re in church—or Temple, I should say—every week; they don’t miss a Sabbath. God can’t turn around without catching a fragrant whiff of roast beef wafting up to his nostrils from the constant sacrifices the people bring as thank-offerings to the Lord. “It’s not for your sacrifices that I rebuke you,” says the Lord. “They are continually before me.” God’s people have been very diligent in their worship, consis-

tently devoting a tithe of their wealth, a tenth of their cows, to the work of the Lord.

It’s not the frequency or regularity of their worship that bothers God; it’s their attitude. The people seem to think that in their worship and with their admittedly sacrificial offerings, they are doing God a big favor. They seem to think that God actually *needs* what they have to *give*.

And so God says to God’s people, “Don’t get all uppity and vain in your worship. You’re not doing me any favors. I don’t need you. Go ahead and bring me your roast beef sacrifices, go ahead and make your pledges to the church, go ahead and lick your little offering envelopes and throw them in the collection plate, that’s all well and good, but don’t you know that every beast of the forest is mine and the cattle on a thousand hills? You want to know my personal net worth?” says God. “You want to see my investment portfolio, gaze across the earth and try to comprehend the cattle on a thousand hills. It all belongs to me.”

And this is why I think this is one of the funnier psalms in the Hebrew Psalter. Okay, it’s not a very funny book, but still... This is what God says: “If I were hungry, would I tell you about it?” In other words, “What contribution do you think you can possibly make to my well-being? For the unfathomed eons of timelessness before the world came to be I was all there was and I was not alone and needed nothing. When it occurred to me that I should not horde the happiness of existence all to myself, I took an infinitesimal singularity—go ahead, try to imagine the smallness of it; you can’t—I took an infinitesimal singularity and blew it up into a universe 30 billion light years across—go ahead; try to imagine the

vastness of it; you can't. For ten billion years I waited in a hot and teeming but lifeless universe while molecules learned to self-replicate and rock morphed into proteins and proteins linked together and twisted into a double helix, and then I watched the whole show unfold on the cosmic stage. I scattered a stunning panoply of diverse beasts across the fields and forests and rivers and oceans. I sculpted the hippopotamus; I concocted the crocodile; I dreamt up the giant squid; who else would or could? I know every bird of the air by name. I count the sparrows and number the hairs of your head. If were hungry, would I tell you about it?"

Every beast of the forest and the cattle on a thousand hills belong to God, and God just plain doesn't need our help. But it's just here that there's a word of grace and gift: God doesn't really need our help but invites us to be God's partners anyway. God doesn't need us but in the gift of worship God gives us the thrilling privilege of entering into relationship with God anyway. God doesn't need us but in giving us the gift of giving, God grants us the thrilling privilege of entering into partnership with God in caring for a world God could take care of all by himself if God wanted to.

It is an extravagant grace to be invited into partnership with another even when you're not needed. Do you remember when you were seven years old and your dad was changing the oil in the car and you asked him if you could help and he handed you a wrench? Do you remember when you were eight and your mother was throwing Thanksgiving Dinner for eighteen guests and you asked if you could help and she put you in charge of the mashed potatoes. The mashed potatoes, without which Thanksgiving cannot be Thanksgiving! Do you remember when you were nine and

your father was framing out a new family room in the basement and you asked him if you could help and he handed you a hammer? Did he give you the wrench because he needed the help? Did you contribute anything at all to the enterprise? But do you remember what you felt like? Who was helping whom? He was giving you the gift of being needed. Do you remember the pride you felt when you became your father's unequal partner? It is the gift of meaning. It is the gift of a role to play. Even though God could accomplish God's purposes all by Godself, God grants us the thrilling privilege of being partners in the stewardship of God's stunning world.

It seems to me that people of vital and vivid spirit get this. They don't come to church because they think they're doing God a favor. They don't come to church because they think God, or even, any longer, your neighbor, demand or expect it. They don't come to church because they think God will miss them if they show up only on Christmas Eve, Easter, and whenever there's free food. They don't give because they think God will go hungry without their meager contribution. They worship because it is an extravagant grace to be invited into relationship with God, and they give because it is a thrilling privilege to be invited to partner with God in caring for God's astonishing creation.

The cattle on a thousand hills belong to God, so we worship and we give not because we *must* but because we *can*. Obligation, you see, is insufficient motivation to large generosity. People of vital and vivid spirit give not out of obligation or coercion or because God needs a favor but because they are grateful for the gift of existence. Life is gift and birth wind-fall, and even to be here at all is a kind of eccentric privilege.

Some of you will know who Dikembe Mutombo is. Last I heard he was playing center for the Houston Rockets, one of the tallest and, at 42, oldest players in the NBA. He's a Congolese American who came to Georgetown University in 1987 with the intention of becoming a doctor, but he got waylaid by Coach John Thompson. 7'2" tall, it doesn't take a genius to find out if the man can play basketball. When he arrived he barely knew a word of English, had to take ESL classes. He was one of the greatest shot-blockers in college and NBA history. With his teammate Alonzo Mourning at Georgetown, he inspired Georgetown basketball fans to form what was known as the Rejection Section in the stands. He once blocked 12 shots in a single NBA game.

A couple of years ago, Dikembe Mutombo decided to build a \$29 million research hospital in Kinshasa, in his Congolese homeland. He raised some of the money, bought off the squatters who were farming the land the hospital was to be built on, and contributed \$15 million of his own money. He named it the Biamba Marie Mutombo Research and Teaching Hospital, after his mother, who died of a stroke ten years ago.

Mr. Mutombo grew up not so very far from the Dinka tribe in Sudan, who understand that the cattle on a thousand hills belong to God; we're just borrowing them, just looking after them for God. Nobody demanded that Dikembe Mutombo part with \$15 million of his own money; it was a free and joyful gift. When they asked him why he cultivated this habit of generosity, he mentioned a central African proverb: "When you take the elevator to the top, please don't forget to send it back

down."² Remember the old elevators before the fancy computerized call buttons appeared?

When you take the elevator to the top, send it back down so somebody else can get there too.

Every beast of the forest and the cattle on a thousand hills belong to God. God is absolutely and utterly self-sufficient. God ran the universe for 15 billion years without us. God needs nothing and no one to accomplish God's purpose. Still, in grace God invites us to join God joyfully as God's partners in caring for creation, in praising the Source of all beautiful things, in looking after the welfare of all those who are still on the ground floor. Life is gift and birth windfall, and even to be here at all is a kind of eccentric privilege.

²Quoted by Harvey Araton, "Mutombo's Dream House Sleeps 300," *The New York Times*, August 15, 2006.