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2016

When God Was A Bird: Contemplating Divine Presence Around Us

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Recommended Citation

Mark I. Wallace. (2016). "When God Was A Bird: Contemplating Divine Presence Around Us". *Awake To The Moment: An Introduction To Theology*. 138-144.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion/383>

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creation can come life-giving ways of seeing and being in the world—daily practices that cultivate connection instead of alienation, wonder instead of fear, courage instead of despair. Contemplative practices like prayer, silent meditation, singing, and opening oneself to both joy and pain nurture just this disposition, and over time contemplation's lessons can permeate the less rarefied or more mundane activities that mark our daily lives.

When God Was a Bird: Contemplating Divine Presence around Us

But ask the animals, and they will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare to you
(Job 12:7-8)

In this chapter, we have begun to argue for the importance of contemplative practices as forms of world making that affect both the content and the method of constructive theology. Theology, in other words, is not only the product of academic or scholastic rigor. There are myriad forms of contemplation that temper our tendency toward scholastic arrogance. One theologian thinks here about cultivating heartfelt compassion for others and wonder at the beauty of the natural world. A scholar of religion at a secular college, Professor Mark Wallace was trained to avoid teaching contemplative practices in the classroom lest students confuse the academic study of religion with particular sectarian rituals. It is one thing to study, for example, Christian monasticism as an intellectual exercise, so the argument runs, but quite another to practice the daily office as a spiritual exercise. But Professor Wallace has found that his students are increasingly hungry not only for religious studies as a detached mode of critical analysis but also for more experiential learning. He has therefore begun to use contemplative rituals with students as integral to

their academic inquiries. These exercises affectively ground the analytically discursive work of writing papers and taking exams, and both modes of learning—heartfelt mindfulness and academic analysis—provide the sonic baseline that shapes the rhythms of his pedagogy. He now describes his teaching as a type of soul craft; that is, his intention is not simply to communicate intellectual content but also to promote a form of knowledge acquisition that is grounded in experiential practices. In what follows he describes one such exercise with his students and its effect on him as a theologian:

I recently encountered a great blue heron while teaching out of doors my Swarthmore College class, Religion and Ecology. I was conducting a three-hour class meeting in the Crum Woods, a scenic watershed adjacent to the Swarthmore campus and near my home where I live with my family. The class began with a silent procession into the woods, where I asked each student to experience being “summoned” by a particular life-form in the forest—blue jay, gray squirrel, red oak, water strider, skunk cabbage, and so on—and then to reimagine ourselves as “becoming” that life-form. After the walk through the woods we gathered in an open meadow, under the shade of a grove of sycamore trees, so that each student and I could “speak” in the first person from the perspective of the individual life-form we had assumed.

I said, “If you imagine yourself, for example, as a brook trout or mourning dove or dragonfly living in and around the Crum Creek, with the creek threatened by suburban storm water runoff, invasive species, and other problems, what would you like to say to this circle of human beings?” This group activity is a variation on a deep ecology, neo-Pagan ritual called A Council of All Beings, in which participants enact a mystical oneness

with the flora and fauna in an area by speaking out in the first person on behalf of the being or place with which they have chosen to identify. A Council of All Beings ritual enables members of the group to speak "as" and "for" other natural beings, inventively feeling what it might be like to be bacterium, bottlenose dolphin, alligator, old-growth forest, or gray wolf. A Council is an exercise in imaginative ontology. Participants creatively metamorphose into this or that animal or plant or natural place and then share a message to the other human persons in the circle. The purpose of a Council, then, is to foster compassion for other life-forms by ritually bridging the differences that separate human beings from the natural world.

On this particular day, as I and my students were imagining and speaking as new life-forms, a great blue heron broke the plane of sky above our heads and glided effortlessly toward the creek. We were spellbound. Flying with its neck bent back in a gentle horizontal S curve, its blue-black wings fully extended, and its long gray legs ramrod straight and trailing behind, the heron darkened the sky above our heads and landed in the shallow water of the creek. Spontaneously, we jumped up from the meadow and walked heron-like—silent, hands held at our sides, strutting in the tall grass—toward this majestic creature now seen stalking and striking its prey with its long yellow bill.

My class and I now felt, it seemed to me, that our imagined metamorphoses had prepared us for a connection—a spiritual connection—to a regal creature whose presence electrified our gathering with agile dignity and rhythmic beauty. We had been discussing, and trying to ritually enact, our identities as fellow and sister members of this forest preserve in communion

with the other life-forms found there. But to be graced with the overhead flight and stalking movement of the great blue heron transformed what we had been learning and practicing into a living relationship with a kind of forest deity, if I could be so bold. We stood on the creek bank and watched the heron balance itself on one leg, silently step toward its prey, jerk its bill toward an unsuspecting frog, swallow, and then rise in flight again off the creek, its great wings flapping in unison. Whatever my students' experience of the great blue heron was that day, for me, this encounter underscored my conviction that the Crum Woods is more than a bio-diverse habitat; it is also, in my religious vocabulary, a green sanctuary, a blessed community, a sacred grove, indeed, a holy place.

To call the Crum Woods a sacred grove may seem odd if one is using traditional Christian vocabulary. Historically, Christian theologians avoided ascribing religious value to natural places and living things, restricting terms such as sacred, holy, and blessed to God alone. While the Bible is suffused with images of sacred nature—God formed Adam and Eve from the dust of the ground; called to Moses through a burning bush; spoke through Balaam's donkey; arrested Job's attention in a whirlwind; used a great whale to send Jonah a message; and appeared alternately as a man, a lamb, and a dove throughout the New Testament—Christianity evolved into a sky-God religion in which God was seen as an invisible, heavenly being not of the same essence as plants, animals, rivers, and mountains.

But in the earth-centered narrative arc of the biblical stories, this historical devaluation of nature as devoid of sacred worth is entirely absent. In Jesus, God is not an invisible sky God but a fully incarnated being who

walks and talks in human form. An astoundingly rich variety of natural phenomena are charged with sacred presence in the biblical accounts, with God appearing alternately in human and plant forms—and animal form. The feathered bird God of creation is the central figure in the Bible's inaugural creation story. In the beginning the earth was formless and empty, and God's Spirit swept across the dark waters of the great oceans. The Hebrew verb used by the authors to describe the Spirit's movement in Genesis 1:1–2 is *merahefet*, alternately translated as to “hover over,” “sweep over,” “move over,” “flutter over,” or “tremble over.” This verb describes the activity of a mother bird in the care of her young in the nest. One grammatical clue to the meaning of this dynamic verb can be found in Deuteronomy 32:11, where God is said to be a protector of Jacob in a manner akin to the way “an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers [*merahefet*] over its young.” Using the same winged imagery deployed by the author of Deuteronomy, the writer of Genesis characterizes the Spirit as a flying, avian being—a bird or something like a bird—to describe its nurturing care over the great expanse (perhaps we should say the great egg?) of creation. Analogous to a mother eagle brooding over her nest, God's avian Spirit hovering over the face of the watery deep is a divine-animal hybrid that challenges the conventional separation of the divine order and the animal kingdom in much of classical Christian thought.

In the story of Jesus' baptism in the four Gospels, God as Spirit comes down from heaven as a bird and alights on Jesus' newly baptized body (Matt. 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22; and John 1:31–34), much as in the Genesis account. All four accounts tell of the same Gospel memory, namely, that as Jesus presents himself

to be baptized by John the Baptist, and is baptized, the Spirit descends on Jesus as a dove from heaven, and then, in the Synoptic Gospels, a voice from heaven says, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." In biblical times, doves—in addition to other divinized flora and fauna—figured prominently in the history of Israel as archetypes of God's compassion. Noah sends a dove out after the flood to test whether dry land has appeared (Gen. 8:6–12). Abraham sacrifices a dove to God to honor God's covenant with him to make Israel a great nation (Gen. 15). Solomon calls his beloved "my dove," a heartfelt term of longing and endearment (Song 2:14; 4:1; 5:2; and 6:9). And Jeremiah and Ezekiel refer to doves' swift flight, careful nesting, and plaintive cooing as metaphors for human beings' pursuit of nurture and safety in times of turmoil and distress (Ezek. 7:16; Jer. 48:28). As divine emissary and guardian of sacred order, the dove is a living embodiment of God's protection, healing, and love.

In all four of the Gospel baptism stories, God as Spirit becomes a very specific type of animated physical body: a seed-eating, nest-building, flying member of the avian order of things. The particular beak-and-feathers body that Luke's spirit-animal becomes is defined by the phrase *hos peristeran*, which means "as a dove," "even like a dove," or "just as a dove"—that is, the Spirit's body is thoroughly birdlike. Some English translations of the Lukan and other Gospel accounts of Jesus's baptism miss this point. While the Revised Standard Version says, "The Holy Spirit descended upon him . . . as a dove," the New Revised Standard Version prefers, "The Holy Spirit descended upon him . . . like a dove" (emphases mine). But the preposition *hos*—from *hos peristeran* in the original Greek text of Luke 3:22 and

elsewhere—does not operate here metaphorically or analogically, but predicatively. The phrase “as a dove” (*hos peristeran*) in this context is not a simile that says that the Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove, but rather a depiction of the physical being the Spirit has become. In other words, the Spirit descended in bodily form as a dove. In the grammar of predication, the Spirit is a dove, not like a dove.

Christianity is a religion that celebrates the enfleshment of God in many forms and, in particular, in both human and avian forms. Christianity, in other words, is a religion of double incarnation: God becomes flesh in both humankind and otherkind. My theological point is that as God became human in Jesus, thereby signaling that human beings are the enfleshment of God’s presence, so also by becoming avian in the Spirit, God signals that other-than-human beings are the enfleshment of God’s presence as well. Christian faith, at its core, centers on belief in God as a fully incarnated reality not only in the humanity of Jesus Christ, but also in the animality, as it were, of the Holy Spirit. If this is the case, is not the wide-ranging world of nonhuman nature—the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the beasts of the field—the focus of God’s interest, not just human well-being? And if this is the case as well, should we not, as human beings, comport ourselves toward the natural world in a loving and protective manner because this world is the fullness of God within the life of every creature?

A theology rooted in the winged God of the Spirit grounds my emotionally felt sense of spiritual belonging with the wider world and motivates me to protect and care for this world. Facilitating my students’ ritual work informs my own contemplative practice, which often consists of sitting in a big chair perched at the

edge of the Crum forest waiting to catch *my* glimpse of the great blue heron silently prancing along the water's edge looking for a meal. Watching for the heron, I take a break from my mad quest for profit and productivity in much of what I do, and I soulfully drift into a trance state that stills my spirit, calms my body, and fills my heart with joy and wonder at the beauty of creation. In this posture of quiet attention, I meditate on the meaning of Jesus' exhortation in the Sermon on the Mount to "look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them" (Matt. 6:26). To rekindle my desire to love this sacred earth, I mindfully consider the great blue heron, and all of the other birds and life-forms whom God feeds and supports, in order to remind myself that God cherishes all of us, human and more-than-human alike, and that this is the ground of our hope in a depredated world. So I ask myself, if God was once the nesting, brooding bird God of biblical antiquity, at the dawn of creation and the moment of Jesus' baptism, could not God today be the balletic great blue heron who lives in the Crum Woods? In a world on fire—in our time of global warming, or more accurately, global dying—I wager everything on this hope.

Virtual and Embodied Practices of Hope and Healing

We live in an increasingly digital environment. Many people today bemoan what they see as the alienation and disconnection brought on by what might be called "screen living." The concern is that we are more attentive to our screens than to the real people with whom we live, work, and play in actual time and space. We "like" our "friends'" posts, get our news from 144-character proclamations, and focus our gaze downward as we eat, talk, walk, drive, and commune.