

Birds of the Bible: Ravens

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August 14, 2016

Ravens, faith, and the great cloud of witnesses. Hebrews 12:1-2 NIV.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. *Hebrews 12:1-2 NIV*

This morning is our second week in the series on Birds of the Bible. Last week we looked at the majestic eagles, and the promise that with faith we would be lifted up on eagle's wings, and borne on the breath of dawn. Flying high. Above all the cares and concerns that life on earth involves.

Today we are looking at faith again, but this time through the lens of the collective. The phrase 'birds of the feather flock together' comes to mind, and in bird terms, that is what the group is called: a flock.

In the context of faith, however, the analogy is the great cloud of witnesses, all those who through the ages, **in the past,** have put their hope, their trust, their faith in God, and run with perseverance, the race of their life. Not a sprint, but a marathon. In terms of the hare and the tortoise, we are on the side of the tortoise... moving forward with intention, and not dozing off halfway through the race, overconfident, and ultimately losing out.

Now flocks of birds are a beautiful sight. In perfect choreographic accord they swoop and dive....Red winged blackbirds, pigeons, goldfinches. We have all seen them, in perfect formation, without, it seems the need of any bird police to keep them in line.

And when it comes time to migrate, hundreds of thousands of birds take wing and undertake their yearly pilgrimage to a warmer climate. They serve as a powerful witness to the thoroughness with which God operates. The care He takes to ensure that everyone ends up where they are supposed to be. Rather like the Marines.... Leaving no one behind. Leaving no bird left behind. They all get the opportunity to migrate. Together.

Ravens, on the other hand are usually solitary birds. They don't hang out with a crowd each day. They like to keep themselves to themselves. A bit like you and I maybe. They get together to migrate, and that's about it. In fact I discovered a lot about ravens this week.

First, their connection with the macabre. I'm sure Vincent Price had one perched on his shoulder at quite regular intervals during his movie career. Ravens are highly intelligent, and one other interesting fact, when they are teenagers, or bird teenage equivalents, they form gangs, and cause a lot of nuisance. Lots of James Deans, without the motorbikes. **Avian Hells Angels.**

We're a lot more like ravens than you might think. After all, remember they are highly intelligent. Just like us.

Sometimes, in real life, when we are away from our Sunday family, we are called to display our Raven perspective. To stand apart from the crowd. To choose a different course of action. To stand up for truth, to stand firm in the face of wrongdoing, to stand alone, like the raven.

That is what we discovered in today's Scripture reading. All those, who down the years, have stood up for their faith, and suffered the consequences.

Jesus was a rebel **with a cause**, unlike James Dean.

We are called to rebel against wrongdoing, evil and malicious intent. In others, and in ourselves. That is why in our Scripture reading from Hebrews we hear the word **perseverance**. Keeping on going, just like that tortoise in the tortoise and the hare race.

Keeping on keeping on.

And it's easy to keep on keeping on when you are with others. Think of the friends you have. How they encourage, and, despite the fact that it can be really really annoying... they have the tendency to tell you things you really need to hear.

Jesus was good at that with his disciples. His flock. He gave them regular attitude adjustments. He praised, but he also corrected. You just have to think of his relationship with Peter. One minute Peter could do no wrong, next minute he could do nothing right. But he kept on keeping on, because Peter wanted to belong, to feel the strength of his flock around him. His own gang, minus the motorcycles.

Now our cloud of witnesses in the New Testament, all migrated in the right direction, home to God. They ran their races, and they won eternal life. But I am sure there were probably of a lot of them, just like you and me, who had a positive talent for being distracted into heading South when they should be heading North.

How often have you had to turn yourself around? Had to pick yourself up, and recover from a wrong turn? A bad relationship? A poor career move, or a financial, emotional or spiritual setback. I have lost count of all the times, I have headed down the wrong tunnel, taken a wrong turn, or been blind to the reality of a situation.

Very often it's friends that have helped me through the rough times. Friends that have steered me straight, got me back on track, flying in formation and not in the wrong direction.

Remember in Hebrews the author says 'us'. 'And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.' It's not all about 'you' or 'me'. It's about US.

And there is that word again. Faith. The reason we come together, the motivation for the cloud of witnesses to keep on keeping on, despite the difficulties along the way. Being cut in half, tortured. Not the sort of thing you want to hear when you decide to become a Christian. Become a Christian. Learn how to suffer.

But faith can help you in any circumstance. St Paul said in his letter to the Phillipians 4:11-13

'For I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.'

You see, the next lesson we are to learn from our birds of the Bible, is faith.

To trust God in all things. To trust Him for the supply of everything we need. Just as the ravens supplied Elijah, in the Scripture we heard this morning. I Kings 17:1-16

As we heard in this story, the ravens supplied Elijah's needs:

I Kings 17:6 The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook. His very own Raven room service.

And then Elijah is sent to Zarapeth to supply the needs of a widow, providing her with a jar of flour and a jug of oil, that never needed a refill.

So there are two lessons to be learned from this story. God will provide, even in the most challenging of circumstances, and we are **expected to provide for others**, as a sort of pay it forward element to our faith. **When we are helped, we are to help others.** That is how faith works. It builds momentum. If we receive and do not pass it on, then the initiative is lost. Like when you first get on a bicycle. To start with the pedaling is hard, but once you get moving, it gets easier and easier... that is how faith works. **There is a momentum involved.**

As the ravens flew back and forth to Elijah, they were being obedient to the will of God.

As Elijah helped the widow in Zarapeth, he too was being obedient to God.

Part of being a member of a flock is taking responsibility for others. Part of being a congregation is taking responsibility for others. After the service, we have volunteers who make us coffee and feed us. We should call it the Raven ministry, because they are supplying our needs. Especially in the coffee department for your minister!!

It's when we bicker amongst ourselves, or disagree, that the momentum is lost, and we become static, neither giving, nor being given to. As our congregation grows, the momentum is encouraging us to reach out to others. Faith in action, as our mission statement says.

God's family. Faith in action.

So we have the example of the ravens, and the momentum they created. We have the strength they gave Elijah to continue to his next destination, the widow in Zarapeth.

We have the flocks of birds, who are strengthened by their sheer numbers, all heading in the right direction, as their instincts tell them when it is time to migrate. Not a single bird will get out a map, or google South America, how to get there. They instinctively know where to fly, and how to fly so they don't crash into each other.

In the same way, the cloud of witnesses that have gone before have migrated from this world to the next. Guided by their spiritual instincts. **Indeed, we are surrounded here in Milford church with our own cloud of witnesses.** Those who built the church, who financed the stained glass windows, often in the loving memory of others. Those who lie in the churchyard could tell us many stories about faith. Both theirs and others. Back in a time when the church was central to most people's daily lives. No smartphones, apps, lattes or Mustangs for them. A much simpler life, a life where community meant safety, trust, confidence... and yes, faith.

We too, in our own time, will pass away, and be the subject of conjecture in the years to come. Who were the members of Milford Church in 2016.... What are the stories they will leave behind? What is to be our legacy? What will we be remembered for?

Faith is the key to all... to the ravens who provided, to the cloud of witnesses who played their part, and to us, coming together as birds of a feather this morning, as Christians, in our flock, to continue to build on what has gone before, and to move forward in faith.

Christ himself persevered. Christ himself willingly gave his life.

Hebrews 12:2 'Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, **the pioneer and perfecter of faith.** For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

And with perseverance, we too at some point in our own lives will cross the finishing line and realize that despite tremendous odds, and with the help of all those who love us, and kept us pointing in the right direction.... we did it! We really did it! And our Lord Jesus Christ will step forward and say 'well done, my good and faithful servant.'

Amen.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for friends, for all those who are a part of our life who keep us headed in the right direction. We thank you for the example of your Son. We thank you for the birds, whose flocks remind us to stick together, to be strong together, and whose beauty in flight is a reminder that faith means motion. Faith means movement. Forwards. Towards you.

In Jesus' name. Amen.