

Bible Study – Session 2
Fauna Sunday



WISDOM IN THE WILD

Earth Reading: Job 39.1-12, 26-30

BEGINNING

This study explores the kingdoms of the wild, living creatures great and small that inhabit our planet, in myriads of forms, shapes and designs.

What creatures of the wild fascinate you? Polar bears? Pandas? Antelopes? Ants? Do you have a sense of kinship with any of them, or do they seem distant, strange and alien? Would you like to understand wild creatures? What might you discuss with them?

In the past, we have assumed a superiority over these creatures that led to enclosing them in the cages of a zoo. We treated them as objects of curiosity, odd spectacles to be viewed as unfeeling objects created for human entertainment. Should zoos be a thing of the past?

As you read the passages in these text, seek to place yourself with the creatures of the wild and explore what it means to be genuinely untamed and free. Assume that you are born in the wild. Does that mean living with abandon?

Background

It is helpful to appreciate one of the fundamental features of all domains in the wisdom literature of the Bible, whether inanimate or animate, namely the inner 'way' that each domain possesses. The task of the wise person according to Proverbs is to understand that 'way', the innate design that governs a creature or part of creation. That was the challenge to Job at the beginning of God's speech. (See the Bible Study for *Ocean Sunday*).

To illustrate the point, let us recall the words of Proverbs 6.6-8:

Go to the ant, you lazybones,
Consider its ways and be wise.
Without having any chief or officer or ruler
It prepares its food in summer
And gathers its sustenance in harvest.

The 'way' of the ant is that code innate in ants that guides them to live in a unique way, in amazing colonies consisting of workers, males and queens. They have an extraordinary anatomy, with no backbone. They are social beings capable of living in harmony in colonies of up to a million ants. After the queen lays her eggs, ant workers care for them by licking the outsides to keep them free of bacteria. And so on. The 'way' of the ant is innate, part of the mysterious impulse implanted in them by God.

Every creature has its 'way', that governing feature Job is invited to explore in the main reading for this Sunday. The 'way' is the wisdom within the ant. For humans to explore that wisdom in the ant means to gain wisdom by observation of nature.

EXPLORING THE TEXT

Read Job 39.1-8

We need to remember, at the outset, that this passage is part of the extended speech of God from the whirlwind challenging Job to understand the 'ways' innate in the design of each part of the cosmos. Chapter 38 focused on the design of the inanimate world; chapter 39 turns to the ways of the animate world, especially the kingdom of the wild.

Job is asked by God whether Job understands the ways of the mountain creatures or wild asses. The life cycle of the deer is governed by natural impulses that leave us amazed. They get no help from humans to give birth or raise their young.

Job knew of donkeys that had been tamed to become beasts of burden. The wild asses, however, are totally different beings. God set them free to roam the salt plains and steppes. They are not only independent of humans, they defy them and their noisy cities. Is it possible for a city dweller to grasp the 'way' of a wild ass?

Discuss: Have you ever sought to grasp the unique way that a wild creature follows instinctively to reproduce, socialise, communicate and survive? Are these creatures all that different from humans? Are there some creatures of the wild that offer a model of behaviour, a lifestyle that humans might well emulate?

Read Job 39.9-12

God then invites Job to consider that wild ox. This text is a brilliant piece of ironic humour, illustrating that humans cannot control wild animals.

You recall the famous passage of Gen. 1.26-28 where humans are given the right to 'dominate/rule' nature. Here God, tongue in cheek, challenges Job to try and do just that.

Now, Job, as a human with the power to 'rule' animals, you should be able to get the wild ox to be 'willing to serve you', be like your handmaid. If so, Job, you would have the wild ox lie beside your bed at night to do your bidding or take care of your baby. If so, then you could make the wild ox plough the furrows of your field. If so, the wild ox will do your daily labour for you. If so, you can trust it to return from the fields bringing in the sheaves and not running away. The implication is that no wild ox will be a docile servant. The way of the wild ox is not to serve humans.

We can also recall Genesis Two where the first human was placed in the garden to 'serve' and 'preserve' it not to dominate the animals (Gen. 2.15)

Discuss: Do you think this text is designed to make Job realise that humans are not designed by God to be the dominant creatures, but to understand the 'way' of creatures in the wild as guides to human behaviour? Consider the way of the ant and 'be wise'!

Read Job 39.26-30

In the verses preceding this passage, God has Job consider the anomaly of the ostrich and the prowess of the horse. God then asks Job: 'Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars and spreads its wings to the South?'

The hawk and the eagle each have its own 'way'. Here God quite explicitly calls that inner way the 'wisdom' inherent in the hawk. The wisdom of the hawk or eagle enables it to soar, to nest on a mountain crag, to spy prey from a great height and take care of its young. The wisdom of the hawk is not something humans possess; it is unique, the inner mystery that makes a hawk a hawk.

The wild is filled with millions of such creatures, each with its own way or wisdom, each capable of living its life cycle in the ecosystems of the wild.

Discuss: What happens when humans invade the ecosystems of the wild with new species, toxins or other activities that transform the landscape of the wild? Is the wisdom of a given species necessarily capable of adapting to a world dominated by destructive human forces? Can humans, by their folly, destroy the wisdom of creatures in the wild?

Read Psalm 104.14-23

This section of Psalm 104 emphasises that the domains of the wild that Job was asked to explore are under God's care. God provides the food, the habitat and the seasons needed for the wild to thrive and enjoy life.

Psalm 104, however, adds another element to the mystery of the natural world. God provides each species with the wisdom to survive. But there is more to life than survival; there is celebration. Humans are given wine to gladden the heart and oil to make the face shine with happiness. God has his/her own tall trees that God waters. Even when lions are roaring, they are calling to God. God even plays in the ocean with the huge sea creature called Leviathan (104.26).

Especially pertinent is the prayer of the psalmist later in the Psalm: may the Lord rejoice in his works (104.31). The natural world is not simply a place of wonder where creatures survive; it is a world in which God rejoices, celebrates like an artist, wanders like a gardener, and plays like a child. The ways of the wild are also ways that God loves and enjoys!

Discuss: If God relates to the world of the wild in this way, what might be our relationship with the mysterious species deep in the jungle or high in the Himalayas? Do you have any sense of wanting to celebrate with specific animals in the world of the wild? How?

CONSCIOUS OF THE CRISIS

Numerous species in the wild are now endangered. The issue is not simply the destruction of habitat in regions that have been cleared. Creatures in the wild are being poisoned or destroyed by the work of human beings.

Mercury poisoning is one of the worst culprits. Coal burning power plants are a primary source of atmospheric mercury. As particles, the mercury falls to Earth quickly. But as an aerosol it can drift across continents.

When mercury washes into waterways or falls into oceans, bacteria transforms it into highly toxic methylmercury that affects many species as it moves up the food chain. Now we are finding mercury where we did not expect to find it—in songbirds from the wild that feed on contaminated insects.

Coal-fired power plants in the USA pump out 23 tons of mercury a year! Mercury is but one of the toxins destroying creatures of the wild. In India, tigers in the mountains have drastically decreased, not from hunting but from the pesticides sprayed on hillside crops that flow into the streams where the tigers drink.

Discuss: What kind of forces are at work to break down the ecosystems in which creatures of the wild find sustenance? Would we be more likely to preserve the world of the wild if we consciously recognised that God celebrates with these creatures? What might be the response if congregations 'adopted' a given creature or region of the wild and sought to understand its 'ways'?

CONNECTING WITH CHRIST

Read Luke 12.22.-31

This sermon of Jesus seems ludicrous to many people today. We are told not to worry about food or clothing! God takes care of the creatures in the wild, so God will take care of us! Ridiculous! Concern for food and clothing are basic to our nature as human beings! We have to take care of our basic bodily needs!

Consider the ravens! Sure! They do not sow, reap or gather into barns! Yet God feeds them. Are we to live like ravens?

But consider the ant and be wise, the wise tell us (Prov. 6.6). They actually do gather into ant barns for the winter. We should emulate them and be wise! Right, God?

Consider the lilies! They don't toil or spin like humans! But the glory of their attire outshines even Solomon in all his splendour. True, but are we to live like lilies whose glory lasts but a short season?

Is Jesus' point that we should not 'worry' about such things as food and clothing, becoming obsessed with getting enough to eat or to wear?? Does Jesus want us to focus our attention on our human drive to possess? Or is there something deeper in his challenge?

Jesus finally gets to his point that we should strive for the kingdom of God! What is this kingdom? A super spiritual realm that has invaded this world with the coming of Jesus or something else?

Jesus makes it clear that this kingdom, this way of living, is in contrast to political or economic kingdoms of nations. Such kingdoms are all about power and productivity, exploiting resources to increase possessions.

The kingdom of God, Jesus seems to be saying, is like the kingdom of the wild where creatures live in harmony with nature and with God their provider. We ought to live our lives in like manner, learning to fit into the ecosystems of creation rather than exploiting them. The kingdom of God and the kingdom of the wild complement each other.

Discuss: The sermon of Jesus might be summarised in wisdom terms as follows: Consider the ways of the kingdom of the wild and be wise! What lessons from the domain of the wild might be learned to gain a closer relationship with our Creator and with Christ in his kingdom?

CLOSING WITH PRAISE

Participants may wish to close by singing the following verses of Hymn 6 from *Habel Hymns Volume One*.

SONG OF THE WILD

1. Will you come back with Me to the birth of the Earth,
Before all its life forms evolved?
Will you sing with the heavens amazed at the sight:
A planet with secrets to unfold?

Refrain:

Will you praise,
Be amazed
With eyes as wide as a child's?
Will you praise,
Be amazed
And sing
The song of the wild?

2. Will you walk home with Me on the way to the wild
And watch baby birds break from their shells?
Do you know how I serve as a mid-wife to all,
The lion, the lizard and gazelle?
5. If you don't feel at home with the rain forest snakes,
If you're troubled when creatures change their skin,
Then surrender the claim that you rule on this Earth
And discover creation as your kin.

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PRAYER

*God of all creation, Christ in all kingdoms,
Take us with you into the kingdom of the wild,
Where your creatures know the wisdom
Of living and celebrating in a balanced ecosystems
And teach us to create your kingdom on Earth
With the same wisdom, care and sensitivity. Amen*