

2019 05 19 – The Winged Ones

Psalm 148

I'm going to begin today with a word game. I will give you a word and I want you to respond with the first word or phrase that comes into your mind. Are you ready? OK, the word is "magpie." How would you respond? (*wait for answers... beautiful, bird, smart, curious, pest, rat with wings, etc.*). I have to tell you that when I came to Saskatchewan I had never seen a magpie. They are, in fact, a western bird and don't exist in Ontario. The first time I saw one I excitedly went back to my congregation and told them about this gorgeous bird that I had observed by the side of the road. I was shocked when they replied, "It's just a rat with wings."

I asked myself, "How could they refer to such a beautiful creature as a rat?" How many of you see magpies in that way? Why? What things do you know about them that would cause you, or other people, to call them a "rat with wings?" (*wait for response: everywhere, loud, scavengers, eat food scraps, eat bird eggs and chicks, peck cattle while eating bugs, capable of wrecking crops*). Exactly, they can be a pest, especially for the farmers and ranchers in this province.

Well here are some other interesting facts about magpies. They have very large brains relative to the size of their bodies. Some researchers have even compared them and their cousin, the crow, to chimpanzees. They have the ability to learn and to adapt. Magpies can even create tools. They will make a

hook out of a piece of wire so they can access food that would otherwise be out of reach. Another fun fact is that, unlike many other birds and animals, magpies can recognize themselves in a mirror. There are definitely two sides to this fascinating winged-one. <https://www.care2.com/causes/6-fascinating-facts-about-the-misunderstood-magpie.html>

The magpie is just one of the winged creatures that we spoke of in today's scripture reading. Psalm 148 is a song of praise. A song that invites humankind to join in with all of creation giving thanks and praise to God, the Source of all Life, the Ground of our Being. In the psalm we read,

Praise God from the earth, great sea creatures and ocean depths,
lightning and hail, snow and frost, gales that obey God's decree,
all mountains and hills, all fruit trees and cedars,
wild animals and cattle, creatures winged and earth-bound.

I love the fact that all water bodies, all types of terrain, all species, and all forms of weather are included in this list. The psalm goes on to include all people too: "young men and women alike, old people and children together." We are all part of God's creation, we are all worthy of God's love, we are all called to give God thanks and praise.

Yes, we are all worthy, but I have to confess that I personally have a special love for one part of God's creation: his creatures with feathers and wings. I love looking at them through binoculars, observing their behaviour and listening to

their voices. I especially love their powerful wings and colourful feathers. Every year, I look forward to spring and then fall the two seasons when birds are on the move and bird-watching is at its peak.

Last week, when I was away on continuing education, I had the opportunity to attend a 3-day retreat called “Taking Flight – Inviting the Winged Ones to Inspire our Living.” The piece of art that I’m using for the title screen of today’s sermon is one that I created on the first evening of that retreat. During the next two days, we looked at four different birds: the magpie and its relatives in the corvid family, the loon, the eagle and the hummingbird. Our facilitator shared stories, videos and pictures about these birds and then we were given time to explore the outdoors and to do some creative art. During this time of exploration we were asked to consider what each bird could teach us, what life-lesson we could learn from their way of being.

We can certainly learn a lot from observing God’s creation. Many of us grew up reading Aesop’s Fables, Winnie the Pooh, Peter Rabbit and many more stories about animals: books that were written to teach us about ourselves. On Wednesday, I went to the Write Out Loud presentation at the Lyric Theatre where Hillarie Tasche, read from her book of short stories entitled, *We are Animals: Three Dark Fables*. Hillarie uses stories of animals to shine a light on difficult issues in our human lives – issues like gangs, discrimination and even suicide.

When I considered the birds of the corvid family, the magpie, the crow, the raven and the blue jay and I realized that they had something to teach me about perception. I realized that they could teach me to notice birds, animals and people, in fact all of creation, in a whole new way. I realized that sometimes my perception of other beings and other things is very shallow. Often I only consider how that part of creation impacts me. More often than not, I am focussed on the part that annoys me. Whether my focus is on a positive or a negative aspect of their being, it doesn't represent all of who they are in the world. Too often, I meet a person and am turned off by a loud voice, or an annoying habit, or a lack of manners and I avoid getting to know who they are under that rough exterior.

Under the annoying exterior of the magpie we found a clever, curious bird. And I have one more amazing magpie fact to share with you: magpies perform funeral rituals. When one of their group dies, they will gather around the bird and one by one go up and touch it, sometimes bringing grass to lay beside it. The ritual also includes loud calls and will go on for a long time. Some people have argued that these are mourning rituals, that these birds are actually grieving the death of their companion. Other researchers argue that the magpies use this ritual as a way of advertising the possibility of a future threat. Either way, it's a pretty incredible thing to watch and a sign of intelligence if not, compassion. A deeper look at the magpie has made me realize that I'm the one that's losing out when I only consider one aspect of any part of God's creation.

<https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/10/151003-animals-science-crows-birds-culture-brains/> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/earth/wildlife/6392594/Magpies-feel-grief-and-hold-funerals.html>

At our retreat, for our creative piece, I chose to write a brief poem about each of the birds and then create a card with pictures and words. The cards are decorating the communion table for today's service. The poems are in the Haiku format: 3 lines, with 5, 7, and 5 syllables respectively. In my poem about the magpie I wanted to emphasize the multi-faceted nature of this beautiful bird. Here it is:

Clever, curious
Mourning in community –
Cursed rat with wings.

No matter how annoying a creature, or fellow human may be, it is important to understand that they are also an integral part of God's creation worthy of love and worthy of an opportunity to praise God. On the flip side, putting anything or anyone on a pedestal is also a dangerous practice, since we are prone to falling off. May we embrace the complexity and diversity of God's creation recognizing that none of us are perfect, and that we are all the beloved children of God.

Finally, as we move to the Choral Offering, I will share with you the poem that I wrote about the majestic eagle:

Soaring, Spirit bird
Symbol of strength and freedom
My soul flies with thee.