

“An Geadh-Glas”

John 3:5-8, 14:15-17 ¹

I was seriously tempted to title this sermon, “Birdland,” which I’m sure you know is a term often applied to Baltimore in honor of the Baltimore Orioles and the Baltimore Ravens. While I am going to talk about birds a good bit, “Birdland” just didn’t seem to have the gravitas I needed for a sermon title.

I’m a bird watcher of sorts, and you may or may not have noticed that birds are everywhere in the Bible, from the first book to the last. The very first chapter of the Bible includes the creation of birds, but even before God created the birds, the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the deep—like a bird (Genesis 1:1-2). And according to the rabbis, that bird was a dove. ²

In Virgil’s *Aeneid*, written not long before Jesus’ birth, the pathway to Hell is called *Averno*, which means “a place without birds.” ³ And as He began the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told His listeners, “*Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? **Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?*** (Matthew 6:25-26).

In her fascinating book, *Consider the Birds*, Pastor Debbie Blue commented that “Maybe God is saying, “Look, stop focusing on yourself, look around for a minute—look at it all. It’s all so beautiful and mysterious and complex—and bigger than you, way bigger than you. Consider the birds, man. Stop being so consumed with yourself, so anthropocentric.”⁴

Today, Pentecost Sunday, is a day on which we celebrate the powerful coming of God’s Spirit into the lives of the first believers . . . and into the life of every believer since. This was and is, that very same Spirit Who participated in the Creation, and, though the Spirit appeared in the form of tongues of fire on Pentecost morning, we’re told that the Spirit had appeared once more in the form of a dove at Jesus’ baptism (Matthew 3:16).

Pastor Blue takes pains to point out that a dove is really a kind of pigeon. And, although we typically imagine that the dove at the baptism was white, the dove at Jesus’ baptism was more likely gray, with an iridescent green-and-violet neck—a rock dove, which is very common in Palestine.”⁵

Continuing to play with this idea, Pastor Blue considers the pigeons we see everywhere, noting that they are often referred to as “feral pigeons,” and she likes this image as a picture of the Holy Spirit among us: “There are lots of birds that want to avoid us, who are too wild for us, who need their space. You could call them unfriendly. Pigeons want to be close to us. They are where we are—in some of the worst places we have made (our neglected projects and abandoned buildings) and some of the best (art museums, parks, Rome’s piazzas). They won’t leave us alone.

“Yet there’s hardly a bird that people are more likely to want to shoot and exterminate. People are very often not fond of pigeons. They call them ‘rats with wings.’ They are considered pests who ‘infest’ urban areas. Cities have tried countless ways of exterminating them, usually

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on May 24, 2015, Pentecost Sunday.

² Debbie Blue, *Consider the Birds: A Provocative Guide to the Birds of the Bible* (Abingdon, 2013), p. 1.

³ Blue, p. 101. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avernus>

⁴ Blue, p. 123.

⁵ Blue, p. 9.

unsuccessfully. What if the spirit of God descends like a pigeon, somehow—always underfoot, routinely ignored, often despised?”⁶

Rather like the humble pigeon, Pastor Blue notes that the Incarnation itself is the story about a God “who comes into the world as a naked, weak, little baby. . . . It’s about a God coming to disarm us by being utterly weaponless, absurdly vulnerable. God doesn’t come in power to save us . . . but in weakness. I can believe this might work,” she writes, “because as far as I can tell, that’s what love is like.”⁷

Tiny sparrows are sometimes denigrated nearly to the extent of pigeons, yet Jesus told us that “*not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care*” (Matthew 10:29). Over and over again, Scripture reminds us that “God cares for what the world considers insignificant. This is all over the text: the weak and the poor, the widows, the broken. Jesus eats with the common people. God’s eye is on the sparrow.

Our eyes are often on something with a little more prestige. Our culture worships stars. People strive for fame as though it were a worthwhile pursuit. We desperately don’t want to be *common*—we are much more attracted to what is shiny and rare; and we are hardly able to convince ourselves that God is unlike us in this respect.⁸

On at least one occasion, Jesus actually compared Himself to a bird. Would you like to guess which bird He chose? An eagle? An osprey? An egret? A robin? No, of all the birds Jesus might have identified Himself with, He picked the *chicken*. “He might have chosen something glorious—the splendid fairy wren, the lammergeyer, a sunbird . . . a bird with a beautiful song or huge strong wings. But out of all the dazzling colorful possibilities—Jesus compared Himself to a hen (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34).”⁹

Jesus was comparing Himself to a free-range chicken, of course, not to a factory-farmed chicken, but it’s still a strange bird to call to mind.¹⁰ Although Jesus tends to be represented in Christian art as a lion or an eagle,¹¹ in the only text I can find in which Jesus compared Himself to an animal, the animal He chose was a bird—a chicken, in fact.¹² And there’s another bird to which God has sometimes been compared, one equally surprising. This is the bird whose name is the title of this sermon.

If you Google the term, “An Geadh-Glas,” you’ll see that some believe this to be the ancient Celtic term for the Holy Spirit. It appears to be pronounced “on God glass,” and it’s thought to mean “the Wild Goose.” Now I don’t know about you, but I’m not any more accustomed to thinking of the Holy Spirit as a wild goose than I am accustomed to thinking of Jesus as a chicken. Indeed, my first thought about both is that it’s disrespectful to speak so about God.

Aslan, C.S. Lewis’s Christ figure in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, is a Wild Lion,¹³ and speaking of Jesus as a Wild Lion seems somehow more appropriate than speaking of the Holy Spirit as a Wild Goose, but there are some clear “bird connections” in Scripture, as we’ve already

⁶ Blue, p. 10.

⁷ Blue, p. 100.

⁸ Blue, p. 142.

⁹ Blue, p. 171.

¹⁰ Blue, p. 180.

¹¹ John the Baptist and John the Evangelist compared Jesus to a lamb (John 1:29, 36; Revelation 5:6, 8).

¹² Blue, p. 183. God the Father is also compared to a hen in Psalm 63:7.

¹³ C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: Macmillan, 1950-1957).

seen. And Jesus suggested a certain wildness and unpredictability in the Spirit when He compared the Spirit to the wind: *“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit (John 3:8).”*¹⁴

There was certainly a windy wildness in the Spirit’s arrival on Pentecost morning, when *“suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them”* (Acts 2:2-3).

One of the greatest problems in our spiritual lives tends to be that you and I frequently live domesticated lives in the service of a domesticated God whom we’ve created in our own image. We become more and more interested in our own comfort and preferences than in following and serving a dangerous God who is rebuilding creation and creating an eternal Kingdom right under Satan’s nose.

Several years ago, Garrison Keillor was asked to choose what he considered to be the five most important books ever written. Keillor put the Book of Acts at the top of his list, commenting that *“The flames lit on their little heads and bravely and dangerously went they onward.”*¹⁵

When our family was in town recently, we took them all to the National Zoo in Washington. We’ve been there before, and we often miss seeing any of the lions, though we always go to look. We saw lots of them this time, but I was struck by how un-magnificent they all were. They were lying around lethargically, bored almost literally out of their skins. It made me sad.

Pastor Mark Batterson wonders whether organized religion might sometimes do to us what zoos do to animals, domesticating us and changing us into something God never intended us to be:¹⁶ *“Sure, the tamed part of us grows accustomed to the safety of the cage,”* Mark wrote. *“But the untamed part longs for some danger, some challenge, some adventure. . . . Jesus didn’t die on the cross to keep us safe. Jesus died to make us dangerous.”*¹⁷

Maybe the date of our death is not really the date carved on our tombstone, because many people are dead for all practical purposes long before that: *“We start dying when we have nothing worth living for. And we don’t really start living until we find something worth dying for. . . . Here is the mistake so many of us make: we start out pursuing a passion and end up settling for a paycheck. So instead of making a *life*, all we do is make a *living*.”*¹⁸

“Boredom isn’t just boring,” Pastor Batterson wrote. *“Boring is wrong. You cannot simultaneously live by faith and be bored. . . . Maybe it’s time to come out of the cage [of our domesticated lives] and live dangerously for the cause of Christ.”*¹⁹

¹⁴ See also Sarayu, the Holy Spirit character in Paul Young’s *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity* (Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007).

¹⁵ Garrison Keillor, “My Five Most Important Books,” *Newsweek*, December 24, 2007, 17.

¹⁶ Mark Batterson, *Wild Goose Chase: Reclaim the Adventure of Pursuing God* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2008), p. 5.

¹⁷ Batterson, p. 6.

¹⁸ Batterson, pp. 16-17.

¹⁹ Batterson, p. 7.

Taking all this together, Batterson wrote a book about living in the power of the Holy Spirit, and, following the Celtic *An Geadh-Glas*, he called it *Wild Goose Chase*. “The Wild Goose,” he wrote, “will take you places you never could have imagined by paths you never knew existed.”²⁰

If you chase the Wild Goose, he wrote, “anything can happen. You never know who you’ll meet, where you’ll go, or what you’ll do. All bets are off. . . . If you would describe your relationship with God as anything less than adventurous, then maybe you think you’re following the Spirit but have actually settled for something less—something I call *inverted Christianity*. Instead of following the Spirit, we invite the Spirit to follow us. Instead of serving God’s purposes, we want Him to serve our purposes.”²¹

What is God really doing in the world, after all? Did Jesus do battle with Satan on the cross in order to make the world stable, or to turn it upside down? Jesus warned us, “*Don’t imagine that I came to bring peace to the earth! I came not to bring peace, but a sword. I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. Your enemies will be in your own household!*”

“*If you love your father or mother more than you love me, you are not worthy of being mine; or if you love your son or daughter more than me, you are not worthy of being mine. If you refuse to take up your cross and follow me, you are not worthy of being mine. If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for me, you will find it*” (Matthew 10:34-39). Does that sound like a tame lion? Indeed, does that sound like a chicken?

I suspect that you’re familiar with the rich young man who came urgently up to Jesus and asked, “*Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?*”

“*Why do you ask me about what is good?*” Jesus replied. “*There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.*”

“*Which ones?*” he inquired.

Jesus replied, “*You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,’ and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.*”

“*All these I have kept,*” the young man said. “*What do I still lack?*”

Jesus answered, “*If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*”

When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth (Matthew 19:16-22).

Reflecting on this encounter, Pastor Batterson commented that “A part of us feels bad for the rich young ruler, right? How could Jesus demand so much? He asked him to give everything he had! But we fail to appreciate the offer Jesus put on the table. . . . This was the opportunity of a lifetime: an internship with none other than the Son of God. . . . but the rich young ruler turned it down. He opted for the cage. And he made the mistake so many of us make: *he chose an accessorized life over a life of adventure*”

“Now juxtapose the rich young ruler with the twelve undomesticated disciples who accepted the unpaid internship. They heard Jesus’ parables with their own two ears. They drank the water Jesus turned into wine. They filleted the miraculous catch of fish.

²⁰ Batterson, p. 2.

²¹ Batterson, p. 4.

And they were there when Jesus calmed the storm, turned the temple upside down, walked on water, and ascended into heaven.”²² *Which choice do you think was the better deal?*

Which choice do you think you would have made? More importantly, which choice have you *actually* made?

Speaking for the Holy Spirit, the Wild Goose, a thousand years ago, Hildegard of Bingen wrote: “I am the supreme and fiery force who kindled every living spark. . . . As I circled the whirling sphere . . . I ordered it rightly. And I am the fiery life of the essence of God: I flame above the beauty of the fields; I shine in the waters; I burn in the sun, the moon, and the stars. And, with the airy wind, I quicken all things vitally by an unseen, all-sustaining life. . . . I *am* Life. . . . Mine is the blast of the resounding Word through which all creation came to be, and I quickened all things with my breath. . . . I am Life . . . [and] all that lives has its root in Me.”²³

Pastor Batterson concluded his book with these challenges:

Quit living as if the purpose of life is to arrive safely at death.
 Set God-sized goals.
 Pursue God-ordained passions.
 Go after a dream that is destined to fail without divine intervention.
 Don't let fear dictate your decisions.
 Don't take the easy way out.
 Don't maintain the status quo.
 Stop pointing out problems, and become part of the solution.
 Stop repeating the past and start creating the future.
 Stop playing not to lose and start playing to win.
 Expand your horizons.
 Take off your sandals.
 Find every excuse you can to celebrate everything you can.
 Live today like it is the first day and the last day of your life.
 Don't let what's wrong with you keep you from worshipping what's right with God.
 Burn sinful bridges.
 Challenge old assumptions.
 Blaze new trails.
 Don't stop making mistakes. Celebrate your failures.
 Don't try to be who you're not. Be yourself.
 Don't make a living. Make a life.
 Quit making excuses.
 Quit playing defense.
 And quit letting eight-foot ceilings set limits on what God can do.
WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU WERE NOT AFRAID?
 Chase the Goose!

And as we come this Pentecost morning to a time of reflection and commitment, I close with a prayer to the Holy Spirit by a woman named Sally:

I feel the
 Beat of your wings
 Stirring the air

²² Batterson, pp. 9-10.

²³ Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), in Carmen Acevedo Butcher, “Supreme and Fiery Force,” *Christian Reflection*, 55 (2015), 58-59.

Around me,
Awakening my slumbering spirit,
Calling me . . .
To rise
To follow . . .

I hear your call,
Behind me, and
Before me,
The call of adventure,
The call to fullness
Of life!

Free me, O Wild One,
From these chains
Of complacency
And the shackles of comfort
I have made.

Free me, O Wild One
For I choose to
Release my heart, and
To follow you again.

Stir me,
Call me,
Free me,
Release me.
Come, O Wild One,
Come.²⁴



²⁴ <http://sallysjourney.typepad.com/sallysjourney/2008/08/an-geadh-glas.html>