

Sunday, February 5  
9:00am & 11:00am

# All God's Critters



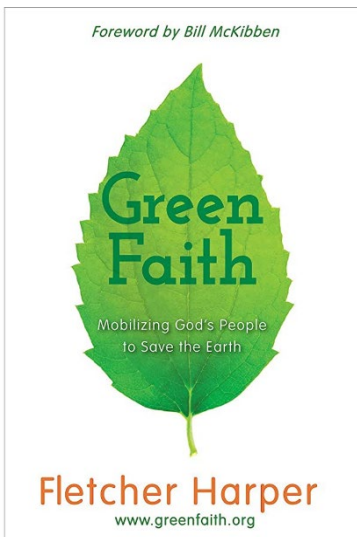
“All God’s Critters”

February 5, 2023 | Heifer Sunday | 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany  
Charlie Berthoud | Job 12:7-10

What’s your favorite animal?

We ask kids this question a lot, but I don’t hear a lot of adults talking about such things. I wonder if we adults have lost our sense of child-like awe and how incredibly diverse and beautiful the animal world is.

And if we’re going to really care for creation and do anything to slow climate change, I think we need to rediscover a sense of awe.



The variety of animals is really spectacular, really awesome in the best sense of the word. In *Green Faith: Mobilizing God’s People to Save the Earth*, Rev. Fletcher Harper writes:

“Cheetahs can spot their prey a distance of three miles. Humpback whale songs, which last up to thirty minutes, may ten thousand miles through the waters. Many scientists now recognize that elephants experience and express joy,



from  
can  
travel  
ocean

anger, grief, and love. A mosquito flaps its wings five hundred times each second.”  
(pp 107-108)

From a different angle, British biologist J.B.S. Haldane is quoted as saying: “The Creator, if there is one, must have an inordinate fondness for beetles.” According to Wikipedia, there are about 400,000 species of beetles.

So what's your favorite animal? Heifer Sunday is as good a Sunday as any to think about our favorite animals. Maybe that's a good Sunday dinner conversation.

My favorite is the American Oystercatcher, a bird I see when we go the beach in New England. My parents got me interested in birds and the beach from an early age, and I am forever grateful.

Oystercatchers patrol the edge of the ocean, looking for food and they are very skittish, keeping their distance from people. They of make a delightful pitter- patter and they make a funny squawking sound, and they have striking orange bills.

The world is filled with amazing creatures.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel invites us into a sense of awe. He wrote:

"Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement . . . . get up in the morning and look around at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed." -Rabbi Abraham Heschel

Today our kids are singing about this amazement, with the wonderful and profound song, "All God's Critters." The song reminds us of the diversity of those critters, and by implication that all God's critters have a place in the choir, a place in the chain of creation.

Scripture also invites us to think about the amazing animal world.

In Genesis 1 we read:

And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm and every winged bird of every kind.

Psalm 104 is a celebration of creation, which actually includes Wisconsin's favorite animal:

“The Lord’s trees are well watered—  
the cedars of Lebanon, which God planted,  
where the birds make their nests,  
where the stork has a home in the cypresses.  
The high mountains belong to the mountain goats;  
the ridges are the refuge of badgers.  
You bring on the darkness and it is night, when every forest animal prowls.  
The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God.  
Lord, you have done so many things! You made them all so wisely!  
The earth is full of your creations!  
And then there’s the sea, wide and deep,  
with its countless creatures— living things both small and large.”

We also hear a celebration of God’s creation in Job, which might be surprising to those who know their Bibles. The text tells us that as Job wrestles with suffering and the purpose of life, he looks to the natural world.

“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.  
Who among all these does not know  
that the hand of the Lord has done this?  
In his hand is the life of every living thing  
and the breath of every human being.”

Thanks be to God for all the words of Scripture.

The Bible affirms what we know to be true. The world is full of beautiful creatures. I want to show you some other wonderful animals:

Chinese River  
Dolphin



Black Rhino—southern  
Africa



Moorean Viviparous Tree Snail—  
South Pacific



Alaotra Grebe—  
Madagascar



Splendid Poison Frog—Panama



All of these spectacular animals have some in common. Unfortunately, they are almost extinct. Many other animals have gone entirely extinct. There is a wide variety in the estimates of how many species go extinct each year, but clearly we are losing many.

We need to acknowledge this loss and grieve this loss, and to recognize our sin, in not taking good care of the world and the creatures that God have entrusted to our care. Many animal extinctions are caused by human activity—as we cut down jungles and forests, as we pollute land and seas and skies, and as we emit more and more carbon.

As Christians we need to repent. So we ask for God’s forgiveness, and we seek a new way forward.

The Presbyterian Church’s “Brief Statement of Faith” helps us mourn and repent. After affirming the goodness of creation, the statement evokes the Garden of Eden, acknowledges our sin, and affirms 21<sup>st</sup> century reality:

“We rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.  
Ignoring God’s commandments,  
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,  
accept lies as truth,  
exploit neighbor and nature,  
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.  
We deserve God’s condemnation.”

And then the next line gives us hope:

**“Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.”**

God is our ultimate hope.

God is at work, transforming us and transforming creation.

One way I see that transformation happening around here is with thirty years of Heifer Sundays. Thirty years of kids learning about animals, agriculture, poverty, environment, and more. Thirty years of generous people supporting good work around the world. Thirty years of hope.

I see transformation happening as we recycle, as we teach our kids and grandkids about recycling and creation care.

I see transformation happening as we shift away from fossil fuels, as we rely more on solar and wind power, as we eat less red meat, and as we fly less often.

I see transformation happen as we get frustrated and angry and organized, as we write letters and send emails to politicians.

I see the transformation happening as we continue to learn and work together to take better care of the world—listening to each other and striving together for the common good.

And I see transformation happening as we listen for the call of God and as we look with new eyes at our scripture, seeing God’s clear concern for this world. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.”

One more verse for today. Lent is just two and a half weeks away and we traditionally begin the season of Lent remembering the temptation of Jesus and his forty days in the wilderness. We read about the forty days of temptation in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Those of us who read the Bible a lot are intrigued by the subtle and sometimes not so subtle difference among the gospels.



In the temptation narrative, Mark has an interesting detail, which I’ve never really noticed until recently. The text specifically says that when Jesus was in the wilderness, he surrounded by animals.

For forty wilderness days and nights Jesus was tested by Satan. Wild animals were his companions, and angels took care of him. (Mark 1.13 *The Message*)

Alessandro Bonvincino, a 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian painter, captured the scene beautifully.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437157>

In the long and lonely and challenging time of temptation, Jesus found a sense of peace and renewed purpose in the beauty of creation, surrounded by a variety of animals.

So what's your favorite animal?

Let us pray.