

September 25, 2022  
Season of Creation, Week 2, Year C (Fauna Sunday)  
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Job 39:1-8, 26-30  
Psalm 104:14-23  
1 Corinthians 1:10-19  
Luke 12:22-31

The biggest news story last week was Monday's state funeral of Queen Elizabeth II. Usually I pay little attention to the British royal family; I'm troubled by the legacy of imperialism and colonialism that it represents. But we Episcopalians are also Anglicans, even if our Church's relationship with the broader Anglican Communion is often fraught. Therefore, mostly because my inner liturgist just *had* to see how the liturgy unfolded, I watched the funeral coverage on television Monday. As it turned out, beneath the layers of pomp and circumstance, Queen Elizabeth's funeral was a standard Anglican burial rite. That rite is very nearly identical to our own burial rite, which many of us find to be the most beautiful Episcopal liturgy of all. It's quite something that a worship service from our tradition supposedly was viewed by over half the humans on the planet.<sup>1</sup>

Before Monday, I had paid little attention to the news surrounding the Queen's death. But on my daily scan of the *The New York Times* headlines, there was one related story that caught my eye. It was this: "When the Queen Died, Someone Had to Tell the Bees." And the subtitle: "A report that the royal beekeeper had informed Queen Elizabeth II's bees of her death received some mockery, but it has been a tradition for centuries." The story describes that tradition, which is not just for the Queen's bees, but for any family's bees, in this way:

The tradition holds that bees, as members of the family, should be informed of major life events in the family, especially births and deaths. Beekeepers would knock on each hive, deliver the news and possibly cover the hive with a black cloth during a mourning period. The practice is more commonly known in Britain but is also found in the United States and other parts of Europe ....

In the 18th and 19th centuries, it was believed that neglecting to tell the bees could lead to various misfortunes, including their death or departure, or a failure to make honey. Nowadays, beekeepers may be less likely to believe they risk bad luck, but they may continue to follow the tradition as "a mark of respect" ....

According to the story, when an editor of a British beekeeping magazine told a friend's bees that their keeper had died, he "quietly knocked on the hives and told them the news." After a 2019 article about telling the bees, "several people wrote in with their own stories of doing the task. One reader, addressing someone else's bees, spoke in rhyme to tell them their master had died: 'Honeybees, honeybees, hear what I say. Your master [name] has now passed away.'"<sup>2</sup>

Today is the second Sunday of the Season of Creation, which this year is noted as Fauna Sunday. Yes, bees and other insects count as fauna. When it comes to creation, I'm not sure how helpful today's gospel reading from Luke is. Jesus says, "Do not worry." Actually, I am good and worried. I'm worried about the bees and the songbirds and the whales and ... well, you know what I mean. Honestly, I wish more people were more worried. Then then maybe we could reach the national consensus necessary to make the changes necessary to avert a climate disaster.

I suppose this reading was selected for the Season of Creation simply because it mentions the natural world. There's not a lot of that in the gospels. Jesus never explicitly says to care for creation. Christians like us infer it from what Jesus says and does. We remember that people in his time were much more in sync with the natural world and lacked the capacity to alter it so drastically. But for many of our fellow Christians, that's just not enough.

In today's gospel, Jesus says that, if God cares for the lowly lilies, God will surely care for the lofty humans. I love this beautiful passage, but it actually reinforces the exaltation of the human. The exaltation of the human permits the subjugation of all else. The subjugation of animals goes back to Genesis 1 and the sixth day of creation. After God made all other living creatures, "God said, 'Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'"<sup>3</sup> Interpretations of this passage have been so problematic for so long that it's hard not to experience it as toxic.

A couple of years ago, I learned of a very different origin story, one that depicts a relationship between humans and other animals that is less about domination and more about interdependence. It's from the Haudenosaunee [HO-de-no-SHOW-nee], the Iroquoian-speaking people of what we call North America and they call Turtle Island. Biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer tells the story in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*. I've quoted from that book before. It was published ten years ago but keeps popping up on *The New York Times* bestseller list, as it did again just last Sunday. This origin story tells how the pregnant Skywoman becomes the first human on earth. As it begins, the earth is covered in water, and only water animals live there. Skywoman lives in the upper realm, from which earth is visible through a hole. Here's how Kimmerer tells that story:

In the beginning there was the Skyworld.

She [Skywoman] fell like a maple seed, pirouetting on an autumn breeze. A column of light streamed from a hole in the Skyworld, marking her path where only darkness had been before. It took her a long time to fall. In fear, or maybe hope, she clutched a bundle tightly in her hand.

Hurling downward, she saw only dark water below. But in that emptiness there were many eyes gazing up at the sudden shaft of light. They saw there a small object, a mere dust mote in the beam. As it grew closer, they could see that it was a woman, arms outstretched, long black hair billowing behind as she spiraled toward them.

The geese nodded at one another and rose together from the water in a wave of goose music. She felt the beat of their wings as they flew beneath to break her fall. Far from the only home she'd ever known, she caught her breath at the warm embrace of soft feathers as they gently carried her downward. And so it began.

The geese could not hold the woman above the water for much longer, so they called a council to decide what to do. Resting on their wings, she saw them all gather: loons, otters, swans, beavers, fish of all kinds. A great turtle floated in their midst and offered his back for her to rest upon. Gratefully, she stepped from the goose wings onto the dome of his shell. The others understood that she needed land for her home and discussed how they might serve her need. The deep divers among them had heard of mud at the bottom of the water and agreed to go find some.

Loon dove first, but the distance was too far and after a long while he surfaced with nothing to show for his efforts. One by one, the other animals offered to help—Otter, Beaver, Sturgeon—but the depth, the darkness, and the pressures were too great for even the strongest of swimmers. They returned gasping for air with their heads ringing. Some did not return at all. Soon only little Muskrat was left, the weakest diver of all. He volunteered to go while the others looked on doubtfully. His small legs flailed as he worked his way downward and he was gone a very long time.

They waited and waited for him to return, fearing the worst for their relative, and, before long, a stream of bubbles rose with the small, limp body of the muskrat. He had given his life to aid this helpless human. But then the others noticed that his paw was tightly clenched and, when they opened it, there was a small handful of mud. Turtle said, “Here, put it on my back and I will hold it.”

Skywoman bent and spread the mud with her hands across the shell of the turtle. Moved by the extraordinary gifts of the animals, she sang in thanksgiving and then began to dance, her feet caressing the earth. The land grew and grew as she danced her thanks, from the dab of mud on Turtle's back until the whole earth was made. Not by Skywoman alone, but from the alchemy of all the animals' gifts coupled with her deep gratitude. Together they formed what we know today as Turtle Island, our home.

Like any good guest, Skywoman had not come empty-handed. The bundle was still clutched in her hand. When she toppled from the hole in the Skyworld she had reached out to grab onto the Tree of Life that grew there. In her grasp were branches—fruits and seeds of all kinds of plants. These she scattered onto the new ground and carefully tended each one until the world turned from brown to green. Sunlight streamed through the hole from the Skyworld, allowing the seeds to flourish. Wild grasses, flowers, trees, and medicines spread everywhere. And now that the animals, too, had plenty to eat, many came to live with her on Turtle Island.<sup>4</sup>

From among the readings for today, instead of Luke, we might turn to Job. To set the scene, awful things have happened to Job, and Job has demanded that God tell him why. We heard just a small part of God’s lengthy response, which is an epically poetic brush-off, one laced with the kind of disdain we might show a bothersome mosquito. God humbles Job by pointing to the amazing and complex creatures that God created. We might also be humbled. We humans like to think we know so much. Maybe we do. But there is so much more of which we have only an inkling.

It was just about this time last year that I read the book *Fox & I: An Uncommon Friendship* by biologist Catherine Raven. It’s the story of her relationship with a wild fox who visited her home in rural Montana, a relationship that she did indeed begin to characterize as a friendship. The fox also has what the author characterizes as a friendship with a magpie. I want to read for you the opening page of that book:

“A double rainbow had changed the course of my relationship with the fox. I had been jogging when I realized that he would live only a few years in this harsh country. At the time I believed that making an emotional investment in a short-lived creature was a fool’s game. Before the jog ended, a rainbow appeared in front of me. One end of the rainbow slipped through an island of tall dead poplars drowning in gray sky, their crowns splitting and spraying into each other. I stopped. A second rainbow arched over the poplars. How many rainbows had I seen in this one valley? A hundred easy, and I always paused to watch. I realized that a fox, like a rainbow and every other gift from Nature, had an intrinsic value that was quite independent of its longevity. After that, whenever I questioned devoting so much time to an animal whose lifespan barely exceeded the blink of an eye, I remembered rainbows.”<sup>5</sup>

Of course, in Genesis 9 God offers a rainbow as a sign—a sign of the covenant that God makes, not just with humans, but with, as it says in the scripture, “every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”<sup>6</sup>

It was early in the pandemic that I began trying to notice more closely the wildlife just outside my back door. Reading *Fox & I* caused me to up my game when it comes to animal attention. I noticed the urgently chattering squirrel who seemed to have warned all the other creatures that a neighbor’s cat was slinking through. I occasionally speak out loud to rabbits and squirrels and blue jays. I realized that the juvenile blue jays come to the feeders together, rather like a pack of teenagers going to the convenience store for snacks after school. I took the leap of naming a couple of rabbits, the only ones with markings obvious enough for our particular variety of intelligence to identify as individuals. I did this knowing full well that I would grieve their possible fates when they inevitably ceased returning.

The risk of love is the certainty of grief. No matter: love *is* the vocation to which God calls each and every one of us. Jesus says to love God and love your neighbor. I like to think he means to include the neighbor who happens to be a different species of animal, or a plant, or a fungus. I even like to imagine he means to include something like a river—that is, an entity that we are too limited in our thinking to understand as “living.” The earth houses a network of kinships so vast and complex that we will never fully understand it. But we don’t have to understand it to experience it as the location of continuously unfolding divinity. This divinity always calls us to love always. And so, love. Love in joy and in heartbreak; with God’s help, just love.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Jon Jackson, “More Than 4.1 Billion Watch Queen's Funeral, Surpassing Every Royal Wedding,” *Newsweek*, September 19, 2022, available online at <https://www.newsweek.com/queen-elizabeth-funeral-tv-broadcast-viewership-audience-1744187> (accessed September 25, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Victor, “When the Queen Died, Someone Had to Tell the Bees,” *The New York Times*, September 13, 2022, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/13/world/europe/bees-queen-elizabeth.html> (accessed September 25, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1:26, NRSVUE.

<sup>4</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis: Milkwee Editions), 3-5. She notes that it is “Adapted from oral tradition and Shenandoah and George, 1988.”

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Raven, *Fox and I: An Uncommon Friendship* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2021), preface.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 9:16 NRSVUE.