

Consider the Birds: the Vulture

Isaiah 40:28-31

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It was the great scholar and theologian Abraham Heschel who said about this text, "No words have ever gone further in offering comfort when a sick and suffering world cries out."¹

Isaiah is speaking to people in exile, people forcibly removed from their homes, taken to live in another place, kept there long enough that one generation passed away and another generation began. A whole generation of faithful Jewish people knew nothing *but* exile. They were taught that this was not their home, which meant, by extension, they had no idea what home meant; no idea what comfort was, no idea what rest really felt like. Their entire existence was unsettled and uneasy and their future was unassured. One scholar writes, of both ancient and modern exile, "There are times in history which are so difficult, times when the challenges are so severe, that even the young will faint and grow weary. There are times when hope is all but impossible to sustain."

There are certainly times in our communal life when that has been the case. Some might say we are living in such a time right now, with dual pandemics of a virus that persists and racism that is even more insidious. Some might say we are living in such a time right now, but point instead to the violence in Palestine and Israel or the overwhelming death count in India. There are times when hope is all but impossible to sustain. And of course, not a few of you are living through times like that in your personal lives: Those of you for whom the sea of grief is fresh and new every morning, or

those of you for whom the echo of grief is old yet still ever-present; those of you who recently heard the word cancer yet again; those of you trying to make ends meet; those of you who feel like you might never be enough, no matter how hard you try. There are times when hope is all but impossible to sustain.

The prophet Isaiah writes for exactly those times. "Do you not know?" he asks. "Have you not heard? Do you remember? Let me tell you again, if you need to hear it: the Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the very ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; he gives strength to the weak and lifts up the powerless, so remember that, when life is hard. Remember that the Lord is here for you, and he will lift you up on wings like eagles, and you will soar and walk and run and nevermore will weariness overtake you, I promise." Abraham Heschel knew what he was talking about. If you are looking for words of comfort, these are some of the very best scripture has to offer.

But this is the part of the sermon where I'm going to start talking about birds. And after totally upending some commonly-held understandings of pelicans with y'all last week, I am filled with a bit of fear and trembling. I assure you, I am not here to take away any comfort from Isaiah's words or even take anything away from the powerful eagle. But we do need to talk about translation a little bit. Whenever the Bible is translated, every time the Bible is translated, it's never an exact science. Every translator, no matter how objective they try to be, ultimately makes

¹ Abraham Heschel in *The Prophets*.

choices about one word over another.

Some of you have heard me say this before. The best way I know to illustrate this is to invite you to write down some letters. (Seriously, grab a piece of paper and a pencil.) Here you go — GODISNOWHERE. No spaces in between, no punctuation, because that's how scripture was originally written. GODISNOWHERE. No spaces between words, no punctuation, just an unending stream of letters. So tell me. What does it say? You've figured this out already, right? It says: God Is Now Here. Except it also says: God Is Nowhere. Both translations are technically correct, but they mean two dramatically different things. So the technical work of translating is one thing, but there is an art to it, too. It's objective, until it's subjective.

One of the most remarkable times this shows up in actual scripture is the last chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. Chapter 28 verse 17 reads, "When they saw him, [referring to the resurrected Jesus], they worshipped him, but some doubted." In Greek, the sentence literally says, "When they saw, they worshipped and they doubted." In the Greek, everyone worships and everyone doubts. But our English translators changed it. And when asked why, the primary translator said, "Well, it didn't make much sense. People can't worship and doubt at the same time." Clearly, the translator was not Presbyterian; we've been managing that for awhile now. Sometimes, well-meaning translators make choices that shape the way we understand a text.

There is a little bit of that happening in our text from Isaiah today. The text says, "Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up on wings like eagles." The word "eagle" in Hebrew is "neshar." And if you look up "neshar" in the most introductory, biblical Hebrew dictionary, you'll find that the primary meaning of "neshar"

is vulture.

And just like that, you feel for the translators, right? "They shall mount up on wings like vultures" sounds ... like something we'd rather not do, thank you very much. *Of course* they reached for another large bird with big wings. One that inspires a little more confidence. Translators apparently said our modern understanding of vultures would get in the way of communicating the truth of God's provision and protection. They've got a point.

I'm going to try and put all this delicately, even though there's nothing delicate about a vulture. Vultures eat dead things. And they're ugly. Their heads are disproportionately small compared to their bodies, and they are mostly bald, so that their feathers don't get in the way of their feasting. If you were to startle a vulture, it would protect itself by showing you what it had most recently eaten in a rather forceful way. And when vultures come across a meal, which is to say, a carcass, they eat until the job is done, meaning they are too heavy to fly right away. So they sit and wait and grunt while they digest, because they don't know how to sing. And last but not least, a group of vultures is not called a flock. It's called a wake. Of course it is.²

Everything about vultures reminds us of death. Vultures don't ever cause death, though. That's worth remembering. They deal with the aftermath of death. They deal with all the things we don't even want to think about much less face and they don't even flinch. Vultures consume the worst the world has to offer. Literally. They can digest bacteria that would seriously hurt any other creature that were to come upon it, including humans. But they are not built to kill — their feet and their beaks are so weak, compared to other creatures, they couldn't do much damage to anything living. They don't cause death. They destroy death.

That's pretty close to what we say about

² These, and most facts about vultures presented in this sermon, come from Debbie Blue's book, *Consider the Birds*.

God, actually. That in raising Jesus from the dead, God destroyed death forever. Isaiah promises us in chapter 25 that God will swallow up death forever. God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and all disgrace will be taken away. Let us be glad and rejoice in that salvation, Isaiah says, the salvation of the God who swallows up death forever. And the apostle Paul quotes that same line in what is perhaps the most famous text about the power of resurrection: "Listen, I will tell you a mystery!" he says. "We will all be changed, in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, and the saying that is written will be fulfilled: Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" And one more, just for fun. The most quoted section of Ezekiel is when the prophet finds himself in a valley of dry bones. God says to the prophet, Mortal, can these bones live? And Ezekiel clatters the bones back together. But maybe, just maybe, those bones find life again because every trace of death had already been stripped away ... by a vulture.

I'm using a bit of my imagination with that last one, of course, but what I know is this: vultures remind us of death because they are always around death. And they are always around death because they are sparing us the worst of it, keeping its power from spreading any further. But know this, too; the bird that descends into death also soars even higher than an eagle. Their wings aren't as powerful, but they know how to soar on wind currents. In 1973, a commercial airliner was flying over Africa at 37,900 feet. Observed by the crew flying at an equal height was a vulture. It is the highest altitude ever recorded for a bird of any kind.

It might be that vultures have more to teach us about God's pervasive presence in our lives than any other creature. "Where can I go from your spirit?" Psalm 139 asks. "Where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, you

are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast."

All those people in exile so long ago they were in the wilderness and everything was out of their control. I'm sure they would have appreciated the power and majesty and confidence of an eagle. But they were also people from whom everything had been taken — their home, their language, their families, their traditions. They had endured every kind of loss and grief imaginable. So if they had to choose, I suspect they'd cast their lots on the vultures, the birds that swallow up death and render it unable to hurt them anymore.

Oh, I know. To our sensibilities, vultures are ugly and awkward and they make us uncomfortable. That's probably never going to change, at least not any time soon. But wouldn't it be just like God? To hide new life and hope and promise in a creature like that, and wonder how long it might take for us to find it?