

Rev. Laura Fitzpatrick-Nager

May 19, 2024

Sermon: A Delirium of Birds and Other Miracles

Matthew 14:14-21

Are there any birders here this morning? Raise your hand if you're a bird watcher. The poet, Theodore Rothke, must have been one, too. Just listen to this spring poem:

A delirium of birds!

Peripheral dippers come to rest on the short grass,

Their heads jod-jodding like pigeons;

The gulls, the gulls far from their waves

Rising, wheeling away with harsh cries,

Coming down on a patch of lawn...

It is neither spring nor summer: it is Always,

With towhees, finches, chickadees, California quail, wood doves,

With wrens, sparrows, juncos, cedar waxwings, flickers,

With Baltimore orioles, Michigan bobolinks...

All in my yard, of a perpetual Sunday,

All morning! All morning! (Theodore Rothke)

A delirium of birds.

I don't know about you, but these mornings have been absolutely filled with a delightful delirium of bird song. I've become obsessed with learning more of the names of birds and their calls...the feathered migrants returning east and those robins and cardinals who are here with us all winter. There's a fascinating new bird app (it's new to me anyway) by Cornell Labs called 1 Merlin. I hold up my phone and record the calls in real time on a walk and find out instantly what birds are singing around me. For a non-birder like myself, this ability is miraculous. Just yesterday over coffee, Paul and I recorded 7 birds from the Carolina Wren to the Song Sparrow and Gray Catbird.

I'm afraid I've become a bird geek which is why my sermon this morning is for the birds!

Hearing so much chatter reminds me of life asserting itself all around us. As long as the noisy lawn mowers and landscapers with their fanatic machines don't co-opt the peaceful moment.

I watched very quietly as a small wren tried to take a long tiny branch into her birdhouse (Paul had placed the birdhouse there only the day before). The branch it seems was too long to get it into the house. The wren turned it around, got it sticking in one way and then it promptly fell out hitting the rocks below. I watched the wren attempt to retrieve the twig twice and dropped it twice. Building anything takes effort, whether you're a bird, a two legged carpenter or a church community.

Thanks to church member Emily Snow's suggestion, I decided to re-read *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson. A pick me up book on birding and our natural world it is not. However, Carson's accessible writing and prophetic voice draws the reader in and 61 years later *Silent Spring* profoundly changed the world and continues to do so.

How prescient Carson was! Her thesis was that the birds of spring had been silenced utterly by human made pollution and toxic chemicals like DDT. A marine biologist and writer, Rachel Carson as you know wrote one of the most controversial books of the 20th century and inspired important

and long-lasting changes in environmental science and government policy. *Silent Spring*, serialized in *The New Yorker* beginning June 16, 1962, and published as a book on September 27, 1962.

Thanks to her audacity in truth telling, a social movement began. DDT was finally banned in the US by 1970 and then all over the world, the last country to ban DDT is India and 2024 is the year they've done so.

The attack on the natural world from the silencing of birds by human made chemicals like DDT to the impact on air water, soil animal and plant life and human beings still resonates today. Although *Silent Spring* instigated legislation that successfully terminated DDT use, other warnings were ignored.

During World War II, the U.S. military declared this revolutionary chemical to be “the most powerful of the new weapons the army is now using in its war on insect-borne diseases,” specifically malaria, yellow fever, typhus and bubonic plague. After the war, planes “broadcast sprayed” leftover stockpiles across the United States and many other countries to kill weeds, crop-eating insects and to control mosquitoes.

Ironically, since banning DDT, the industry has replaced one poison with even more toxic ones. And that doesn't even begin to address our production and addiction to plastics since Carson's time. The silencing of the birds that Carson noted along with the devastating impacts of toxic chemicals on air water soil—all have been harbingers of the climate changes we're experiencing today. We are still a fossil fuel addicted country.

Now, according to climatologists and environmentalists, 60 years later, birds may face even more threats than any other animal group because they live in — or migrate through — every habitat on Earth. Birds are impacted by land-use changes, pollution (ranging from pesticides to plastics), climate change, invasive species, diseases, hunting, the wildlife trade, and more.

Carson wrote words that we can hear anew today:

“We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in [Robert Frost's](#) familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road — the one less traveled by — offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth.”<sup>1</sup>

The one less traveled by.

One of Carson's proteges in the environmental movement she initiated, is Bill McKibben. He recently offered the keynote address at the United Church of Christ Earth Summit last month. As you'd expect, McKibben began outlining the reality of where we are in the climate crisis-and, it's hard to hear. That the thirty-year history of the global-warming fight is largely a story of the efforts by the fossil-fuel industry to deny the need for change, or, more recently, to insist that it must come slowly.<sup>2</sup>

That the summer of 2023 was the hottest on record since the beginning of well, for thousands of years.

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, 1961.

<sup>2</sup> Bill McKibben Keynote + Q&A (from 2024 UCC Earth Day Summit)

And did you hear that just this week the Governor of Florida passed legislation to remove anything related to Climate change and reverse renewable energy in his state?

I can hear Gandhi now, “The Earth is sufficient for everyone’s needs but not for everyone’s greed.”

The clock is ticking. Says McKibbon, we have basically 5 years and 7 months.

5 years and 7 months until 2030. The Paris Accord deadline for cutting fossil fuel production in half in order to save the planet from warming and greenhouse gasses pushing us to 3 degrees Celsius mark, the track we’re on right now.

In 5 years and 7 months, our 7th grader will be going to college.

In 5 years, and 7 months, my 1 year old nephew will be finishing 1st grade!

And he’ll be a senior citizen in the 22nd century.

What will you be doing in 5 years?

In 5 years, will a majority of us be driving electric vehicles to church?

There’s something of the miraculous needed if we’re going to make that deadline.

Now there is a lot of good news, just noticing the return of the ospreys nesting in CT is a visible sign of the impact rewilding efforts have along our shorelines. Focusing on the good news helps me to quell the anxiety around climate change that many of us feel. McKibbon and other experts remind us of the clear reasons to find hope in spite of the “Weight of Nature”<sup>3</sup>

According to the experts, we have ninety-five per cent of the required to produce 100% of America’s power needs from renewable energy by 2035, while keeping the electric grid secure and reliable.<sup>4</sup>

Some of us in our community are leading the way, have zero emissions homes and find a way to never buy plastic...

The truth is we *already* have nearly everything that we need to turn this natural world around. As a wise voice once said, “Miracles like angels are not rare, they are something we labor for and make! In our gospel story of today, the Feeding of the 5,000, people are hungry; too many to count. Jesus, disciples, the followers and the boy with the two fish...everyone is needed; it is an intergenerational effort.

Without those two fish shared, or those loaves of bread from this neighbor and that one over there...this biblical potluck might never have happened. Without Jesus along with the effort of the disciples and the people in the crowd sharing what they had, there would have been no meal at all.

And not only is everyone fed but there’s an experience of communion; the text tells us there were 12 baskets full to overflowing after the disciples gathered up the fragments. (Matthew 14:21)

Call it distributive justice or the theology of crowdsourcing, one thing is clear: In order for miracles to happen, everyone is necessary.

“We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.” said the Hopi ancestors. There aren't easy solutions to any of this as the prophetic voices around us make clear.

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3 Clayton Aldron, *The Weight of Nature* (2024)

4 Bill McKibbon website

Our new members today received a potholder made by the *Ladies Who Stitch*, it's meant to be a reminder that everyone is invited and needed at the feast- we need all of us in the kingdom of God. The road less traveled is a long one. And we have many miles to go before we can sleep.

I, for one, am grateful to be on that road with all of you, learning to listen to the birds along the way.

Rachel Carson wrote a book on Wonder after the blockbuster of Silent Spring. She noted, “*There is symbolic as well as actual beauty in the migration of the birds, the ebb and flow of the tides, the folded bud ready for the spring. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature - the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after the winter.*”

May it be so...

Amen.