I’d like to start this morning by telling you about a ritual I learned about when I lived in Western China. It’s a burial ritual performed by Tibetans called a Sky Burial.

Often when someone has died in Tibet, their body is taken up the side of a mountain and laid out on a flat area - usually a flat rock that there’s naturally. Then a Buddhist monk, or another designated person, prepares the body so that vultures can dispose of it. After the vultures have eaten all they can, the remains of the bones are ground up and put into *tsampa* (a type of food that’s a little like an unsweetened cookie dough). The *tsampa* with the bones is then given to other birds of prey - hawks and the like.

Probably this ritual developed because there isn't much wood on the Tibetan plateau - most of it is above the tree line. I read once that the average elevation of the plateau is 17,000 feet, and trees don’t grow much above 12,000 feet. So it’s hard to burn bodies because the only thing you can burn them with is yak dung, and that’s a vital and scarce fuel source in a region where it can snow year-round. It’s also often too cold to bury bodies because the ground is frozen. So some other kind of ritual needed to be developed to honor the dead.

A few years ago I was talking about this with a friend, and she said, “What’s striking to me about the Sky Burial is that it seems like such a violent ritual for people who are non-violent pacifists.” And there might be something to that - I’ve been chewing on that thought for a long time. But I’ve come to think the Sky Burial actually says less about violence than it says about the way Tibetans value life.

When Tibetans talk about a Sky Burial, they talk about it as a way they can be generous to the animals we share life with - particularly the birds in this case. *I can’t use my body any more, so the birds should have it for nourishment.*

But feeding vultures? Does that really say something about life? I don’t want my body going to nurture vultures. They’re such gross, ugly birds who eat death and decay. In Western culture, vultures are almost exclusively thought of as revolting, aggressive, and disgusting. People who exploit other people are called vultures. In literature and movies they’re omens of death - warnings of dark times ahead.

Rachel and I saw a flock of turkey vultures circling around near her family’s cabin a few days before our wedding and it gave us the creeps. It means something died nearby, or was in the process of dying, and ick - who wants to think about that?

Well, to the Tibetans vultures are sacred birds. They’re sacred because they don’t kill living things in order to survive, but only feed off of things that have already died. Much like Tibetans. Tibetans will only eat meat if someone else has killed the animal (pockets of Muslim communities in Tibet are the meat butchers). So this bird is considered honorable for a people who value non-violence.

This is a different way of looking at vultures.
I shared about the Sky Burial because today we’re talking about the vulture and the hen as they appear in the Bible. If you weren’t here last Sunday, we just started a new sermon series last week called Consider the Birds where we’re looking at the roles birds have in Scripture, and using them as examples of how studying nature can 1) help enhance our understanding of God, and 2) enhance our understanding of how the writers of Scripture understood God.

Just as in Tibetan culture the vulture carries a different meaning than in our own, the same is true in parts of the Bible. So, sometimes the vulture is used in a way that we would expect. But other times—probably the majority of the time—we might find the use of the vulture surprising.

Let’s start with how it’s used in ways we would expect. Like us, the ancients observed that vultures feed on dead animals, including humans. Jesus himself said, “Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather.” This aspect of vultures made them unclean according to the Law of Moses, and the Hebrew people were told not to eat them.

Debbie Blue writes: “Proper burial was important to the Hebrew people. If you weren’t properly buried, the vultures and other carrion eaters would tear your body up. ‘Thy carcass shall be meat,’ is a horrible thing to say to someone. It was one of the worst curses you could hurl in biblical days. It’s like wishing someone a fate worse than death. In Deuteronomy God threatens the Israelites with this fate if they fail to abide by the covenant … Goliath threatens David, ‘Come to me and I will give your flesh to the birds.’ The prophet Hosea warns the unfaithful Israelites that they will be defeated by the Assyrian Empire. He says, ‘Set the trumpet to your lips, for a vulture is over the house of the LORD.’ In Revelation birds gorge on the flesh of the defeated ‘beast.’”

Vultures do have an ominous undertone in the Bible.

But I learned something that surprised me, and that might also surprise you. And that’s this: when the world “eagle” is used in the Old Testament, very often it’s a translation of the Hebrew word nesher, which scholars agree most likely refers to a griffon vulture and not to the bird we think of as an eagle. When an eagle is referred to in the Old Testament, it’s most often actually a vulture.

The more I researched this, the more I realized there’s a long-standing debate among Jewish scholars over this word, nesher. And it seems that, as vultures became more and more loathsome to non-Asian cultures over the centuries, Bible translators found it increasingly difficult to compel themselves to use the word ‘vulture’ when it’s referring to God because it triggers an “ick” response. We don’t want to compare God to a vulture. We like the eagle better. And so over the years, even after the poor translation was brought to light and discussed, some translators felt “eagle” would be better for the audience. And so most of our Bibles use the word vulture when the Hebrew word is referring to the bird doing something ominous or gross (like eating dead things or
impending war), and they use *eagle* when the word *nesher* is describing something more positive.

Interesting.

Consider Psalm 103:1-5.

**Psalm 103:1-5** - “Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”

How would it sound to our ears if that psalm said, “Praise the Lord … who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the vulture’s”? Kind of strange, right?

Or that famous passage from Isaiah:

**Isaiah 40:30-31** - “Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

Well, actually, they will soar on wings like *vultures*; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. I’ll be honest - changing that one word makes me cringe a little.

Interesting fact about vultures: they fly higher than any other bird. Most birds fly below 500 feet, but vultures regularly soar high in the mountains, easily over 10,000 feet. Back in the early 1970s an airplane collided with a vulture over the Ivory Coast in Africa at an altitude of 37,900 feet. 37,900 feet!

And it’s not that they’re particularly strong birds to can drag themselves up that high by brute power, they’re just designed to be especially adept at riding upward currents of warm air. They’re incredibly aerodynamic.

When the prophet Isaiah and the psalmist write about soaring on wings like vultures, or having our youth renewed like a vulture’s, it’s probably this incredible feature of the bird they’re referring to.

So vultures out-soar other birds by leaps and bounds. But there’s also a maternal aspect to the vulture that was described by the Hebrew people. In Deuteronomy, God gives the people a song to sing so that they remember who he is and what he’s done for them. This is part of that song.
Deut. 32:7-11 - “Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you. When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all humankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel. For the Lord’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance. In a desert land he found him, in a barren and howling waste. He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye, like an [vulture] that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them aloft.”

God shields and carries his people, like a vulture who stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them aloft. Here, God is like a mother bird opening her wings to protect her young, catch them when they fall, and carry them to great heights. Here, God is a fierce and loving mama vulture.

The ancient Egyptians thought of the vulture in this way, and that may or may not have influenced the way the ancient Hebrews thought of the birds. The Egyptian goddess Nekhbet was a vulture, referred to as the “Mother of Mothers who existed from the beginning, and gave birth to all that is.”

The maternal aspect of the vulture that’s hinted at in Deuteronomy reminded me of the way the hen is talked about by Jesus in the New Testament. The hen gets only two mentions in all of the Bible - and it’s the same saying by Jesus that’s just recorded in two different places by Matthew and Luke. Jesus is in the middle of intensely rebuking the pharisees and other teachers of the Jewish law for their hypocrisy - for the way they try to follow the rules of the Law but neglect actually caring for people. And he ends his tirade by saying:

Matthew 23:37-39 - “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”
What does this mean?

For years I heard teachings on this verse that talk about how when a barn catches on fire, a mother hen will gather her chicks under her wing to protect them. As the fire sweeps over them, the mother hen gets incinerated and the chicks survive. And this does seem to have some application since at the time Jesus says this, he’s on the brink of laying down his life for the sake of the world. And he seems to know it - Jesus knew that prophets were often put to death. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you …” Jesus, the mother hen, was going to lay down his life for the sake of all God’s children, putting his wings over us and holding us close.

But I was reading a teaching by Carl Rasmussen, Professor of Old Testament at Bethel University, and he talks about how he was teaching about the barn fire and the mother hen, when a man who grew up on a farm piped up with a different interpretation.
Dr. Rasmussen writes: “[This man] said that he had grown up on a farm and that a hen has a variety of informative ‘clucks.’ For example a certain clucking sound would call her chicks to eat. He also said that as a prank, he would cut out a cardboard eagle or hawk, affix it to a long stick, and would then maneuver it so that the shadow of the bird of prey would fall within the vision of the hen. Upon seeing [the shadow of the fake] bird of prey she would utter a special clucking sound that called her chicks to gather under her wings for protection from the danger! This of course is what she would do when a real bird of prey was threatening her or her chicks.”

I found this idea of a hen having different clucks compelling because I’ve been reading parts of Carl Safina’s latest book, Beyond Words: What Animals Think and Feel. Carl’s a friend of our community who’s a professor of ecology in New York. He talks about how birds (among other animals) use very clear language. Birds have unique words they communicate with, and this includes unique words for predators. A certain cluck or whistle can mean “snake,” “hawk,” etc. Jesus grew up in a farming community, and may well have also noticed that various hen clucks mean, “Danger! Come get under my wings!”

This makes sense in the context too. Prophets are often the ones warning others of impending danger. They say: “Look, if you keep doing what you’re doing, bad things are going to happen.” Jesus is saying to the teachers, “All you hypocrites, you keep oppressing people and requiring things of them that are too hard for them without doing a thing to help - brood of vipers he calls them! I’m clucking and clucking my danger sounds, trying to gather the chicks under my wings so they can be protected from your exploitation and hate, but they’re not willing to come.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate.”

It’s a maternal image of God. A picture of God as a mother hen protecting her young. Like the picture in Deuteronomy of God as a mother vulture protecting her young.

Many parts of the Bible describe God as a warrior, as one who goes to battle for his people. But we also have a few pictures of God as an embracing and protective mother. The writers of Scripture employed every tool they had to describe this God who is both beyond and as near as the next breath; a God who is mother and father, male and female; a God who is divine, a God who is human.

We have a richer picture of God because the biblical writers use birds to talk about who he is in this way. Just as I think we have a richer picture of God when we have a multi-dimensional understanding of birds. Vultures aren’t one-dimensional birds; simply ugly and disgusting because they eat dead things. The ancients watched and noticed that they’re also maternal, they have a symbiotic relationship with the earth that allows them to take advantage of changes in temperature to fly higher than any other bird, and the
fact that they’re death eaters isn’t always a bad thing. They don’t kill living things; maybe that’s worthy of respect. And, after all, isn’t our God the One who is described as devouring death too? Our God is a death eater; not in the Harry Potter sense of the phrase, but in the sense that God brought death into himself, and was undeterred and unharmed by it. Perhaps that is vulture-like and a way that vultures reflect the story of their creator. And perhaps gaining strength from this death-eating God is less like riding the wings of an eagle than it is slowly soaring on the incredible heights of a vulture’s wings.

Two Minutes of Silence
We’re going to have two minutes of silence. And in this time, I want to invite you to think of something that’s causing you to have fear or anxiety in your life, and then picture God as a giant mother vulture or mother hen (whatever works for you!) pulling you under her wings. Feel the safety of that. And then as we move into the second minute, picture yourself climbing on the back of a giant bird and soaring high above. Maybe you want to rest there. Or perhaps ask God to give you a birds-eye view of your problem. To put it in perspective.