

For reasons that I don't need to enumerate, we find ourselves in a time of backlash and that brings days of increasing alarm, and we sense that we are in a for a long haul struggle. In a hundred meter dash there are no Gatorade tables for the runners to hydrate 50 meters in. But in a marathon, yes Gatorade tables along the way. In a long distance struggle, we all have to pay attention to mutual care and self-care. So today I want to follow Emily's lead in our post-Pentecost series, drawn from a work of ecological theology, "When God Became a Bird: Christianity, Animism, and the Re-enchantment of the World" by Mark Wallace. Ecological theology is about what we can learn about and experience of the divine through our engagement with nature, because the natural world is for all of us a primary source of care. Not just physical care, which is obvious, but also emotional and spiritual care.

That title is provocative: When God Became a Bird, but the part of the title that caught my attention was "The Re-enchantment of the World." We've all known or felt or suspected or hoped the world is an enchanted place, a wonderland. But we also know our society tends to dull us to that reality: as though Nature is just another profit center to exploit. So one of the tasks of a spirituality to sustain us through struggle is nurturing this sense of the world as an enchanted place, so we can experience it that way again as our ancestors did. This is all the more important when human wickedness and folly is on the rise—that's a time to lean into the creation as a portal to the Creator, to a sense of divine connections. A world where God can meet us in many different ways because it is an enchanted place, animated by divine energy.

I have behind my ears these little marvels called hearing aids. Hearing loss is a natural part of aging, and usually people don't notice their own hearing loss, they just notice that people around them mumble a lot. When I finally got my hearing aids, I remember walking home with my new ones, and hearing the birds chirping, something I'd been missing, probably for years. What a blessing to have them back in my world! Birds make the world a more enchanted place.

Today I want to spend a little more time with a scene in the gospels in which God literally came as a bird then tell of two birds who manifested divine presence to me. "***But it first happened that when all the people had been baptized*** [by John the Baptist at the Jordan River in Judea] ***and when Jesus had been baptized and was praying, the sky opened, and the holy life-breath came down to alight on him in a form with a body, appearing as a dove, and a voice came from the sky: "You are my beloved son; I've taken delight in you."***

I'm using a very literal translation: the Spirit "***came down to alight on him in a form, with a body, appearing as a dove.***" The language here is not so different from Philippians, chapter 2, which portrays Jesus as "***being in the form of God.***" Jesus came in the form of God but so did the divine

presence we call the Spirit come upon Jesus in the form of a bird. Neither divine appearing, in either form—a human or a bird—was beneath the divine dignity.

If there's a little voice inside your head that says Jesus being in the form of God sounds right but a bird being in the form of God sound fishy, it's worth briefly interrogating that voice. Because in the West, so much of our Christianity was deeply corrupted when Christians hitched their wagon to European Colonial powers—England, Spain, Holland, and others. This unholy alliance produced readings of Scripture corrupted to support the unholy aims of colonial conquest: Europeans over indigenous populations, lighter skin over darker skin, men over women (and we know this dominance hierarchy is threatened by anyone who doesn't fit into that tidy binary) but also, humans over other of God's creatures. Under the violence of colonialism, the conquered people are dehumanized, but also, the creatures of the conquered territories are demystified. One form of domination always makes other forms of domination easier to pull off (especially with the silent acquiescence of those not personally threatened by the dominance hierarchy being imposed.)

So we may have absorbed readings of the Genesis creation poem, that import-impose a firewall between humans and “the animals.” But to do that you have to ignore how Genesis emphasizes the similarities between all creatures, humans included. All share a common divine origin and come into being via divine utterance. The humans do not receive the first blessing in the Genesis poem, that honor goes the sea creatures. Many other creatures besides humans explicitly share “the breath of life” (a divine breath) which often goes unnoticed. The entire poem is portraying the whole earth as a temple (a sacred place) which makes all creatures worshippers of a shared creative and creating deity. Even the trees are depicted in Scripture as singing to the Lord and clapping their hands. So, no, there is no firewall between humans and other creatures. And yes, we humans are more than animals, but so are non-human animals more than animals. (Not to rub it in, but Balaam's ass even prophesied in the book of Numbers)

So it is entirely fitting for the Spirit at Jesus baptism, the holy spirit, or holy life-breath, to alight upon Jesus *in a form with a body, appearing as a dove.*

If I had to pick a scene in the gospels that conveys to me the sense of the divine presence when that presence can be felt, it would be this one. There's a sense of **expansiveness**, conveyed in this scene by an open sky; of tender **immanence, near-by-ness**, or **connection** conveyed by a dove alighting [a black capped chickadee land on my hand] and a sense of delight conveyed by the voice saying, “I delight in you.” That combination of feelings: expansiveness, nearness or connection, delight, often accompany our experience of the creation as a portal into the divine.

Remember this scene takes place at Jesus baptism—a baptism of repentance he participated in along with the crowds. Jesus is functioning here as a representative human. So this isn't just about Jesus—

that Jesus is special and all that. This is also about us, what we can experience of God, including ways that God comes to us through the creation....

This series got me thinking about times when God came to me, in the form of a bird.

Year 2000. I'm still mourning the loss of my father in August of 1999. The natural sense of withdrawal, even depression that can accompany loss, meant my previous ways of praying weren't cutting it for me. I picked out a book from my father's bookshelf, called *Beginning to Pray* by Anthony Bloom. He has a section on silence where he says (I'm paraphrasing) silence as a form of prayer is like bird watching, you go into the forest, just before the birds start their morning chorus and you sit there quietly, so as not to frightening the birds away You are still, quiet, but attentive, not sleepy And when the birds are ready, they will make themselves known, perhaps one will even alight near you. It's not something you can make happen, but you can create the conditions where if it does happen you can notice it happening.

My father had died in a bed placed in my office on the first floor. After he died, I put the chair I inherited from him, next to the window and put one of those acrylic bird feeders you attach to the window with some sunflower seed. I'm thinking, birds should be here any minute, but of course birds don't just show up immediately Every morning I'd sit there, waiting for my first bird. Three weeks, nothing. One day, I tried out another thing I learned about silence is to take the verse from the psalms, "Be still and know that I am God" and do it like this: Be Be still ...

Wouldn't you know it, when I finished the meditation with the last "Be still and know that I am God" there's a stirring outside my window, open my eyes, and see that a blue jay has landed in the bird feeder. Now this could be magical thinking, but I always associated blue jays with my father. My first memory of a bird was being at my grandmother's house, the house my dad grew up in and she was out in the backyard, hanging clothes and I was watching her when a blue jay dive bombed my grandmothers white haired head. She used that tint that white haired women of her generation used to keep the white hair from getting yellowed and this brightener would sometimes give of a blue hue. Anyway, the blue jay dive bombing incident made quite an impression on me, at age 6. And then father used to have one of these bird feeders at his apartment, and he often commented on the blue jays; lots of bird feeder people think they are pests my father liked them.

That experience made me more attentive to birds as indicators of divine presence. I've had maybe 3 others but I wonder how many others I missed because I wasn't paying attention.

If you'll indulge me, I'll offer one more "When God was a bird story" because it begins with a great story about my late wife Nancy. Nancy was much loved in the Pioneer High School field hockey world when our daughter Grace was playing. She was like the team chaplain. In fact, back in 2010 she agreed to do some marriage counseling for a lesbian couple associated with the team that hadn't had

“pre-marital counseling” so they felt comfortable talking Nancy about some of their issues and she offered to do after the fact “pre-marital counseling.” So, Nancy had this goody two shoes reputation, which she carried with her since high school. Anyway, we’re watching Grace play varsity Lacrosse, which a number of the field hockey players did on the off season. When Grace stumbled and her leg went at an unnatural angle, immediately Nancy, who had suffered ACL injuries in both her knees, realized Grace had just torn her ACL and she was due to go to American University on field hockey scholarship in a few short months. And in her anguish Nancy yelled out from the stand as loud as I’ve heard her yell, the word “God” coupled with the word “Damn it” a phrase I’d never heard her use before in any setting whatsoever. That’s the backstory to the bird story.

So Grace arranged to graduate early in order to go to American University early and get better rehab for her knee from the team trainers. Being the 5th of 5 kids, this was a big deal, especially for Nancy who was uber mom. So we drive Grace to D.C. to set her up, and suddenly I start feeling all sad and distressed and worried about Grace’s knee and picturing her re-injuring her knee in field hockey and that’s when I knew Oh, Nancy’s not the only one struggling I am too. So I revert to my Pentecostal side and went alone to the field hockey field and I reactivated by gift or capacity or whatever of speaking in tongues, which my Episcopal priest spouse says, “Oh that sounds like scat, I can do that, but I don’t think it’s the gift of tongues.” Spoil sport.

So I’m at the field hockey field, no one’s around and I decide to walk all the line markings of the field—and there are several, more than a soccer field, and I’m praying for Grace and her knee and her field hockey playing, employing my gift of tongues—and keeping an eye out for any random bystanders who might alert campus police of this strange guy on the field hockey field. And when I complete the circuit so to speak, I’m in the goal crease that American University would defend in their home games. And I’m just standing there thinking, OK now what do I do? And in that moment a hawk, I think a cooper hawk, or a red tailed hawk swept down right in front of me maybe 15 feet away, across the field as if it were showing off to me.

All the feelings of the gospel scene were present: expansiveness (not that tunnel vision of worry) and the nearness, the closeness of something beyond this world yet also in this world, and an overlay of delight along with that out of the blue “everything is gonna be all right” feeling. And it was.

So for me, I’m extra attentive to birds. Maybe you are drawn to deer sightings or maybe a favorite tree or a certain configuration of running water or time of day....

These are all phenomena to pay attention to, to savor, and the next time it happens see if you notice that sense of expansiveness, of nearness or connection, and the sense of delight with its “everything’s gonna be all right” feeling.