

# **Ties that Bind: Behold the Hippo**

Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr.  
The Community Church of Sebastopol  
April 21, 2013

Job 40: 15-24

In her classic book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard shares this brief conversation: “A woman said to me recently, ‘Seem like we’re just set down here, and don’t nobody know why.’” Dillard goes on to wonder if we can ever really know why we are here – the why question is always so fiendishly difficult. But, she suggests, what we can do is “explore the neighborhood, view the landscape, discover where it is that we have been so startlingly set down, even if we cannot learn why. For each day when we wake, if we wake at all, we wake to mystery...”

“Seem like we are just set down here and don’t nobody know why.” Where are we in this world, this neighborhood, in which we have been set down? What is it like, where do we fit into it and what, if any, is our responsibility to it? And what about the mystery of it all? It seems to me that these questions are even more crucial now than when Annie Dillard suggested them a generation ago.

In 2013, after the hottest July on record and a summer marked by record wildfires and drought so severe that barges ran aground on the Mississippi River, here came Superstorm Sandy, the largest storm ever measured with the lowest barometric pressure ever recorded north of Cape Hatteras, and storm-force winds stretching 1040 miles out from the center. How many more Sandys are out there? And who ever thought you would need sunscreen and swimming suits for a visit to the North Pole...or, at least to what’s left of the North Pole? It just might be that the issues of climate change and care of the environment – air, land and water, and those who live there – could be the biggest challenges humanity has ever faced. Ok, but, you ask, is this appropriate topic for a sermon? Is it an issue of faith and faithfulness or something we should turn over to science and scientists?

Don’t ask me...let’s ask the Psalmist. “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it – the world and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.” Or how about this: “O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures...” “The Earth is the Lord’s.” Is that true? And if it is, what difference does it make as we struggle to figure out just where we are in this neighborhood, how we fit in? People of faith have often struggled with their relationship to the natural world. Somewhere along the way we created this separation between the spiritual and material, the sacred and the secular. Much classical Christian theology stressed the spiritual nature of humans over against the physical nature of everything else. The world and its plants and animals and water and air were basically ours to do with as we pleased. But the Psalmist would seem to have another opinion. And so, interestingly enough does the Book of Job.

When God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind, one of the things God says is this: “Behold Behemoth, which I made along with you and which feeds on grass like an ox. What strength he has in his loins, what power in the muscle of his belly...His bones are tubes of bronze, his limbs like rods of iron...Under the lotus plants he lies, hidden among the reeds in the marsh. Can anyone capture him or trap him and pierce his nose?...He ranks first among my works.” Job has a long and well-justified list of complaints against God, but God responds by praising the hippo! Job 40: 15-24, is a hymn of God’s praise to the hippopotamus! Amazing what you can learn in church!

In Job 40, we hear God saying that the hippo is a creature of mine that does not respond to humanity’s beck and call. It is my creature. This living work of art, this grand expression of my creativity, belongs to me, and me alone. I want you, Job, with all your focus on yourself and your problems, to know the importance of this creature – and all creatures - in my sight.”

Behold the hippo! It is an invitation to Job and to us to view creation through the eyes of the Creator, to begin to understand that all of God’s creatures have intrinsic value over and above any value and worth we may place on them. Calvin DeWitt is a zoologist and a Christian who likes to speak of a “God-soaked creation.” Reflecting on Job 40 he writes, “Every creature reflects some of God’s poured-out love. And so, concerning the hippo, we do not first ask, ‘How can I shoot it...can I eat it...how can I market it...how can it get it out of my way?’ Instead we wonder, ‘What does God think of this creature...how should I, in my relationship to it, honor its Creator...How might I learn to live with it...how does it fit into the larger system of which it is a part...of which we all are a part?’”

Curiously, the scientist is the one calling us back to a biblical understanding of creation and our relationship to creation, and such an understanding may be our last and best hope. The biosphere – in Genesis, the Garden – serves us, providing us with good food,

beauty, relaxation, water and air. It also filters water, provides topsoil for crops and a livable environment that sustains and enhances life. It serves us, but we are also called to serve and care for it...that is what the biblical concept of stewardship is all about. Says DeWitt, "Stewardship of the earth impels us to deeply understand the complex systems of the planet and the biosphere. It leads people to value the earth as a treasure held in trust...What God expects of us is returning the service of the garden with service of our own...Our love of God the Creator, God's love of the creation, join together to commission us as co-servers of creation." It's an idea so old that it now sounds radically new. And it may be the only thing that can save us from our arrogance, ignorance and greed...i.e., from ourselves.

The time has come, perhaps is past due, when we have to do all we can, at whatever cost, to defend God's good work. In the words of theologian, Sallie McFague, "There is no way the whole can flourish unless all parts are cared for...We need to learn 'home economics', when it comes to our community, our planet, the basic rules of how our garden home can prosper...and what will destroy it. Most simply, the house rules are: take only your share, clean up after yourself, and keep the house in good repair for others." Just what kind of planet do we want to pass on to our children and grandchildren?

Behold the hippo! The Psalmist looks out upon the natural world and sees God...sees the glory of God in every living thing fully alive. And in the face of so many environmental challenges, with more and more species being forever eliminated from the earth each year, perhaps what we most need to capture – or recapture – is this biblical sense of wonder – of appreciation. In the well-known words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

Earth's crammed with heaven  
And every common bush afire with God:  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes.  
The rest sit round, and pluck blackberries.

Can we be the ones who see and then take off their shoes? An Annie Dillard story: "I once saw a mockingbird make a straight vertical descent from the roof gutter of a four-story building. It was an act as careless and spontaneous as the curl of a stem or the kindling of a star.

"The mockingbird took a single step into the air and dropped. His wings were still folded against his sides as though he were singing from a limb and not falling, accelerating thirty-two feet per second through empty air. Just a breath before he would have been dashed to the ground, he unfurled his wings with exact, deliberate care, revealing the broad bands of white, spread his elegant broad-banded tail, and so floated onto the grass. I had just rounded the corner when his insouciant step caught my eye; there was no one else in sight. The fact of his free fall was like the old philosophical conundrum about the tree that falls in the forest. The answer must be, I think, that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there...Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of a mystery. We must somehow take a wider view, look at the whole landscape, really see it, and describe what's going on here."

Eugene Peterson, pastor and writer, says: "I wake up each morning to a world I did not make. How did it get here? How did I get here? I open my eyes and see that 'old bowling ball sun' careen over the horizon. I wiggle my toes. A mockingbird takes off and improvises on themes set down by robins and wrens, and I marvel at the intricacies. The smell of freshly brewed coffee works its way into my nostrils...There is so much here – around, below, inside, outside. Even with the help of scientists and poets, I can account for very little of it. I notice one thing, then another...I look through telescopes and into microscopes, curious and fascinated by this endless proliferation of unadulterated Is-ness – color and shape and texture and sound. How did this happen? And why this? Why anything at all? Why not nothing at all? I am awake, alert, in wonder. Is wonder-induced gratitude the most fundamental of human responses, the emotion most congruent with life?"

I love that phrase... "wonder-induced gratitude." What a difference it could make if we could only step back, step back and see that beauty and grace and mystery are all around us; step back and see, really see, that earth is in fact crammed with heaven, the Creator is present in the wise and mysterious rhythms of the world, in the intricate wonder of a summer flower or the joyous laughter of a five-year-old. Creation, not separate from the holy, but in fact infused by, empowered by, loved by, given life by the Holy...all of it. All space sacred space; all ground holy ground.

So how can we not care for it, protect it, cherish it, nurture it – mirror God's love for the world, be God's partners in maintaining the health of creation? Because it is true, you know...God has the whole world in God's loving hands.