

Season of Creation 2024, Part 1

## **More Bird than Human**

By the Rev. Salying Wong

The northern bald ibis went extinct in the wild in Europe 300 years ago. They were hunted and their habitats were destroyed. Small populations of the northern ibis only existed in zoos. But now they're back in the wild. Scientists of the Vienna Zoo have bred them and are now reintroducing them again in the wild. But that is not a simple matter.

When the chicks hatch in the zoo, foster ibis-parents take them to their aviary and have the chicks imprint on them. From that time, the birds see the humans as their parents and trust them. The parents are worthy of their trust. They feed them, clean them, clean their nests, and socialize with them. You can see pictures of these foster parents lying around a field, with the ibises standing around them and on top of them, and the parents putting their arms around them. The foster-parents know each ibis by name.

Early reintroduction programs failed. When they released the ibises, the ibises didn't know where to migrate for the winter. They flew in random directions and died.

Unlike small birds like warblers, large birds do not have an instinct to fly in ancient migration routes. They have to be taught. So, the scientists board an ultra-light aircraft, made of a parachute and fan motor, and show the ibises the way. Right now, 36 ibises are following their foster parents on this plane for a 1740 mile journey from Austria to Spain, to their wintering grounds. As they fly, the foster parents carry bullhorns, yelling out encouragement to their foster children, saying, "Come this way. Follow me!" It is a 50 day journey, with stops along the way to replenish and rest.

An interviewer of the pilot marveled that the birds see the humans as their parents. To which the pilot commented, “Well, these foster parents are more bird than people.”

I love that. It reminds me of the Gospel of John, where we hear that the “Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us.” The foster-parents had become more bird than human to love the birds. God became human to love us. When I see the foster-parents hanging out with the ibises in the field, I think, that is what God did for us by “pitching his tent among us.” Or, as another translation, “tabernacled among us.” And when I hear that the foster-parents mapped a path to a place of “green pastures and still waters that revive the soul,” and showed the ibises the way, I think, that is what God did for us. And when I hear that the foster parents flew with the ibises, leading them, calling them each by name, saying, “This is the way, follow me,” I think that is what Jesus did for us, leading us on a way that leads to life. This is what “belief” means in the Gospel of John. Not a the intellectual ascent of an abstract conception of incarnation, but a lived relationship of love and trust. This is why we can full-heartedly ascent to John’s Gospel’s claim that those who believe have life. It is like the birds who trust their foster parents to lead them to life.

It is no wonder that Jesus often used imagery from nature to describe who God is and what God’s intentions are. Nature, creation, is a non-textual Gospel that we can read wherever we are, for our encouragement, delight, and purpose.

Unlike the people Gregory the Great is complaining about in our second reading today, I have always marveled at creation. That is why I became a scientist for my “first half of life.” I still marvel, all the time, at God’s creation. My religion informs my wonder, even when I was in my hard core science days, when I was a unicorn in the lab: someone who loved God and science.

Robin Kimmerer is also a unicorn. She is a professor of botany. Yet, unlike many scientists, she does not force a false “objective” relationship in her studies. From

her Potawatomi perspective, she relates to plants and animals as her elders, as her teachers. In fact, her tribes use the language of family when talking about trees and animals and earth—much like St. Francis, who addressed creation as Brother Sun and Sister moon, and brother wolf and sister fox. She says that western science has objectified nature and, in so doing, has lost a relationship of connection and kinship. When anything is objectified, you can do all sorts of terrible things to “it”. We can all see how that plays out by the destruction we see around us.

For this same reason, I almost never use the word, “environment”, when referring to nature. Rather, you’ll hear me speak of “creation,” instead. This is because the word environment distances me from God’s created order—this word, “environment”, somehow assumes I’m the “subject” and everything outside of my body is the “object.” But, that’s not true. I am a creature among God’s creatures. We all share this fragile earth, our island home. We all belong to each other and impact each other and must care for each other. Kimmerer says we humans are the younger sibling of nature. As such, we need to be in a humble position of learner and listener.

Professor Kimmerer notes in her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, that she would poll her students as on this question, “Are humans good for nature?” She was shocked that her students—students who wanted to do “environmental studies”—thought humans were terrible and can only harm the “environment.” Part of her work, as Professor Kimmerer says, is to restore our view of ourselves as ones who can relate to nature in a mutually beneficial way. We humans are not wired to be destroyers.

In this season of creation, I hope we will ponder this, what it means to be of service and kinship with God’s creation. We are in this season for six weeks, with a liturgy from a council of bishops that gives shape to this intention. We face a global climate crisis and the sixth extinction, a human generated extinction process. Perhaps, besides what we can do to slow or halt these things, we need what the prophets spoke about—a repentance, a change in perspective about what

it means to be human. Rather than seeing nature and creation as objects, we move so close to our own creatureliness that the line between object and subject fades, and what is left is kinship.

This is what the foster parents of the ibises did for the birds when they became more bird than human. This is what Jesus did for us—when God became one of us. What if we spent this season pondering our human ability for great empathy, to shrink the distance between subject and object such that the only thing left between is love? What could all that love do?