

Season of Creation, Part 6, St. Francis and the Ostrich

The Healing Creation Gives

By the Rev. Salying Wong

"The ostrich's wings flap wildly,
 though its pinions lack plumage.
For it leaves its eggs to the earth,
 and lets them be warmed on the ground,
forgetting that a foot may crush them,
 and that a wild animal may trample them.
It deals cruelly with its young, as if they were not its own;
 though its labour should be in vain, yet it has no fear;
because God has made it forget wisdom,
 and given it no share in understanding.
When it spreads its plumes aloft,
 it laughs at the horse and its rider."

Today, on this last Sunday in the Season of Creation, we hear from the Book of Job. Job, as many of you know, has suffered a lot. He's lost his family to illness, his fortune to ruin, his health and happiness to the vagaries of Satan. His friends suggest that all this is because he has sinned. Job adamantly denies this. He's done nothing wrong and all this calamity has fallen upon him. He is angry at the injustice. He searches for answers. He wants a flow chart of just desserts, but he cannot fit himself into it. This lack of certainty drives him crazy.

Even when God restores to Job everything he has lost and more, not everything is hunky-dory. Today, God wants to address the wound in Job's heart. Not all losses can be replaced. Job is stuck in his wound because he wants to know why the world is unfair, why bad things happen to good people, why the laws of the universe do not apply to moral life. Instead of answers, God says to Job, "If you keep pursuing certainty, you will always be angry. Instead, find solace for the ambiguity of existence in my creation. Let

my creation teach you that while you can't understand everything, you still can live in joy and awe. In fact, having awe in my creation can heal you."

So, God gives Job some examples of animals that God thinks are particularly delightful: the mountain goat, the wild ass, the ox and the ostrich.

In this Season of Creation, we've had a bird theme. You heard about the northern bald ibis, the regent honeyeater, the great auk, the California condor, mixed species flocks. Today, of course, I will talk about the ostrich. First, I was uber-curious that the ostrich was on the list. I looked on my bird map, and there are no ostriches in the Middle East. I found out that the ostrich before the 1800s was everywhere in the Middle East and Asia Minor. But, they were hunted to extinction in those areas. Sadly, reintroduction programs in Israel of the ostrich have failed.

But, at Job's time, they were common—and yet mysterious. What Job didn't know is that the ostrich is the "oldest" bird in the world. Birds are dinosaurs that survived the asteroid collision with earth 66 million years ago. All the other dinosaurs died except the birds. It helps to be small when there's little to eat. Of those living today, the ostrich has been around the longest. Its fierce dinosaur character is reflected in this statistic: more people are killed by ostriches than by any other bird. Stay away from those talons!

God finds it funny that the ostrich flaps its wings vigorously, even though it doesn't fly. What God is too shy to say, but I am not, is that when the ostrich is flapping its wings, it is probably doing its mating dance. Quite beautiful, actually. Look it up.

A cock ostrich will have a harem of five to seven hens. All the hens in the harem lay their eggs in one hole in the ground. But there's one major-hen, and she incubates the eggs. Amazingly, the major-hen knows exactly which eggs belong to which hen. Before the major-hen begins to incubate the eggs, she will sort the eggs, keeping her own of course, and some other—but pushing out the eggs of the weaker hens. She'll keep about 20 eggs. Those who witness this might think she doesn't care for her young, throwing them out of the nest. But, she is following Darwin's observation—the fittest survive.

God seems a bit disapproving of her laying her eggs in the sand; but seriously, it's the desert. Where else? But do not worry, she is a fierce defender of her eggs and the

predators know this and usually leave the ostrich alone. When she is incubating, the hen will stretch out its neck and head across the sand. From a distance, she looks like a mound of earth, so that the predators will walk on by. This and other behaviors have led to the myth, first supposed by Pliny the Elder, that ostriches hide their heads in the ground because they are afraid.

When the ostrich is chased, it mocks the horse and rider. An ostrich jogs at 45 miles/hour over a long distance. A horse at full sprint can barely get there. And if the ostrich sprints, it can go to 60 miles/hour. In the desert, the only animal that can compete with her speed is the cheetah.

Now that I've fully addressed all the points God says about the ostrich in the Book of Job, I'd like to turn to St. Francis. Francis and Job have a lot in common. They both had a lot and lost a lot; they both suffered immensely. Francis came from a rich merchant family. He grew up with a dream of going on a crusade as a soldier and winning glory and riches for himself. His conversion to the values of the gospel took time. While he found he was able to give alms, even half his cloak to a poor man, there was still one profound thing he could not do. He could not abide lepers. When they came asking for alms, Francis would hide. Putting on my spiritual direction hat on, I would say that Francis' revulsion at the lepers was an invitation by God to embrace the truth of all that Francis found revolting about himself: his arrogance, his greed, his vanity. He accepted this invitation through a time of prayer. One day, when a leper came for alms, he gave him an embrace. It was after this moment that he really became the Francis we admire.

But Francis suffered immensely for this embrace of the leper and himself. His father was an abusive man. When Francis took his father's cloth and sold it to rebuild San Damiano church, his father beat him violently. His father then dragged him before the priest of the local church, who in those days, dealt out justice. His father intended that the priest make Francis behave the way he wanted him to behave. Instead, Francis stripped all his clothes before the church and his village. He showed them all the old scars from previous beatings; he showed them the fresh bruises and bleeding wounds. And then, he walked away.

Unlike Job, Francis embraced a way of poverty rather than have any riches restored to him. But, like Job, his heart was wounded. He was traumatized from the violence of his

father. So much so, that whenever he went into his hometown, he would bring one of his brothers with him. If Francis were to encounter his father, the brother was to whisper in his ear, "You are the beloved." Otherwise, Francis would find himself back in that moment when his father would club him, belt him and choke him—and he could not move.

We often think of Francis as the saint who loved creation. But, I think it is more true that Francis is the saint who let creation love him. After so much trauma, it was creation—brother sun and sister moon, brother wolf and sister bird, brother tree and sister flower, that gave him solace and healing. He must have needed a lot of time sitting in the midst of God's creation.

Have you ever needed the solace and healing of being in nature? Have you ever felt how it could accomplish something mysterious that no amount of therapy and kind words could do? I remember how when my mother was really sick and she'd been in ICU for over a month, I would go to the ocean and stare and stare. It was how I was able to cope.

When the Metropolitan Kallistos says that we humans are placed by God in a covenant with all of creation, he says it is a gift. Surely, many of us have felt the gift of this covenant with creation by its ability to heal us. Today, let us be mindful of this gift and covenant. Let us fulfill our part of the covenant, to care for and also heal creation. And yet, let us with Francis and Job, partake of the healing of God's awesome creation.