

28 June 2020  
Isaiah 40:27-31, Isaiah  
53:1-5, Philippians 2:5-11  
God is a Vulture  
First Mennonite Church

This week I almost fell out of my chair. Let me tell you why. Every week I begin my sermon research by reading the chosen passage of scripture several times in different translations.

I will pause over words, highlight specific words, and jot down first impressions. I then go to my reference books, including my Bible dictionary, to see the range of meanings within each word. This week, one of the words I highlighted was eagle as I planned to explore the metaphor of **God as an eagle**. I discovered the Hebrew word is נְשֹׂאֵר “nesher”, and although this word is usually translated as “eagle” in most English Bible translations, it could also be translated as **vulture**. I was blown away! A vulture? Is God like a vulture?



For how many of you is this passage in Isaiah 40 a favourite one?

*...those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
they shall run and not be weary,  
they shall walk and not faint.*

Would it still be your favourite if it went like this?

*...those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like [vultures]?*

It doesn't conjure up the same images, does it? Or, think about our hymnody and how it reflects the eagle metaphor. A beautiful inspiring and hope-filled song on page 596 in our blue hymnbook is based on this Isaiah passage:

*And I will raise you up on eagle's wings,  
bear you on the breath of dawn,*

*make you to shine like the sun,  
and hold you in the palm of his hand.*

Would it have the same inspirational impact if it went like this?

*And I will raise you up on **vulture's** wings,  
bear you on the breath of dawn?*

I don't think so. I can't imagine what the breath of a bird that eats rotting meat would smell like at dawn—or at any time of the day for that matter. I don't know what comes to your mind when you hear the word, vulture, but the images that come to my mind are ugly and disgusting. I mean, just look at this baby vulture—it has a face that only its mum could love!



The word, vulture, come from a Latin word (vuellere), meaning "to tear". They tear at the flesh of dead corpses, some so rotten that the meat can be toxic to other animals. Most vultures are bald. This allows them to stick their entire heads inside a carcass without feathers to foul with blood and rotting flesh.

*...those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like ....*

Did Isaiah have in mind eagles or vultures?

At first glance, an eagle seems to be a more fitting reading. Unlike the ugly vulture, an



eagle, especially, the bald eagle, is beautiful. Bald eagles aren't bald like a vulture, but have a gorgeous snowy-feathered head and white tail. Their eyes, while they are the same size as human eyes, are three times as powerful. They can see us far better than we can see them. They spot their prey from far away,

sometimes more than 1 km. They swoop in and power-dive. Isn't that a wonderful image of God?

While they don't appear to be too friendly—with their furrowed brows and their dangerous looking beaks, you must be impressed by their huge leg muscles, giant claws, and powerful wings. Aren't these descriptors enough to conjure up some impressive and awe-inspiring images of a fearful but all-powerful, all-seeing God?

The bald eagle, which most, if not all of us, think of when we talk about eagles, is the national symbol of the United States. It's a North American bird, so it wouldn't have



*Flag of Mexico*



been foremost in Isaiah's mind. Regardless, eagles are on the national coat of arms of many countries, including Albania, Mexico, and Nigeria—to name but a few.

Countries love the eagle as a symbol of their power—or at least hoped-for power, which begs the question why

Canada chose the beaver its

symbol?!! The eagle was an important symbol in the Third Reich. The Nazis called the day they were to invade Britain Aldertag, or "Eagle Day." The eagle is a favourite symbol of militaries around the world. The US military has a fighter plane called, the F15 eagle.



Sermons about God as an eagle have tended to encourage the faithful how to be eagle-Christians. Eagle Christians go forth fearlessly in the face of worldly adversity and conquer their enemies. But, how many stories in the gospels does Jesus use the eagle imagery not just to describe God, but as a model for how Christians are to be and live in the world?

In my sermon two weeks ago, I preached on the Isaiah passage which comes right before the one Don just read for us. These verses in Isaiah were directed to Israel during the Babylonian exile in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, after Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. Israel was defeated, dispirited, and in utter despair, because the God of Israel, the one whom they assumed would always protect them, didn't. In the logic of the ancient world, the destruction of Jerusalem, and of the temple, meant

that the God of Israel had been defeated by the Babylonian god. The God of Israel was, in the end, powerless and unfaithful.

Isaiah was given the difficult task of convince his despairing and dispirited people that God was strong enough to counter Babylonian claims and able enough to deliver and return God's people back to the Promised Land. Isaiah did this by painting an incredible metaphoric picture of God the creator. God was **so big** as to hold the oceans of the earth in the palm of a hand and to measure the heavens as a seamstress might measure cloth from nose to outstretched hand; a being **so sovereign** as to weigh the mountains and hills in a scale as a pharmacist weighs herbs (v. 12). Isaiah use the metaphor of **Creator** to point Israel to God.

In today's reading Isaiah's argument becomes specific. Isaiah voices Israel's complaint against God, when he asks in vs 27,

*Why do you say, O Jacob,  
and speak, O Israel,  
'My way is hidden from the Lord,  
and my right is disregarded by my God'?* (Isaiah 40:27)

This question reminds me of other times Israel questioned or complained to God. For example, in Psalm 44 the writer asks, *Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?*

The question of Israel, deep in crisis, awaits an answer from God, but **the wait is long and the answer is not forthcoming.**

How many times have you been in crisis and called on God to answer: why did this happen or when will you answer me, only to hear silence? How many times have you looked at all the violence, hatred, and injustice in our world, and asked God, when will you makes things right? Why are you not acting? It's during these times, you can probably identify with the feelings of Israel in exile.

Isaiah concludes his argument with some either/or statements. **Either** people, including high-energy young people, will be faint, weary, and exhausted by the wait, **OR** those who hope and wait and expect God will have the strength to eventually fly, run, and walk.

The main point Isaiah is making here is the importance of being **patient**. I suspect most of us are tired of this virus pandemic, the stay-at-home orders, the bans on

non-essential travel. We want things to return to normal. We want to move forward, stop with these pre-recorded worship services! Yet, we know the virus is still out there, not at all contained or controlled. We don't have a vaccine yet. It's tough to be patient in a pandemic. I find it hard to be patient when I'm stuck in a sluggish lane at the grocery store or behind a car that can't seem to do more than 20km per hour! How often do we lose our cool over these situations?

Isaiah reminds us that the God of creation isn't done creating. God continues to work making all things new, which means that God has boundless energy. For those who are able to wait patiently for God, God will renew their strength so they can *Mount up with wings like eagles/vultures, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

I return now to the metaphor question. I have three reasons why the vulture can be a helpful metaphor for God.

**First, vultures are patient as God is patient.** A vulture's wings are huge, but not powerful in the same way an eagle's wings are. Vultures fly higher than almost every other bird on earth. They do so not through their own brute strength, but by riding the warm thermal air that rises up from the earth as the sun heats the ground. Many birds ride thermals (eagles included), but the vulture is the king of soaring on the thermals. Most birds fly below 150m (500ft). Vultures glide effortlessly on the winds at more than 3000m!

In 1973, a griffon vulture, like the one pictured on our bulletin, collided with a commercial airliner over Africa. It was flying at—wait for it—11,500m (37,900 feet)! This is the highest altitude ever recorded for a bird.

Their ability to fly that high isn't a result of exerting their own force—it isn't raw power and muscle that catapult the vulture upward. Rather, they open up their huge wings and ride the air currents. If you ever watch nature videos of them, you can watch them, and it looks like they are flying in slow motion. They hardly flap their wings.

Isn't that a lot like your experience with God? Isn't God a little bit more slow-motion—a patiently waiting sort of a God; often a little quiet—behind the scenes? It takes a long time for us to get to know God. We pass down our partial knowledge to our children and grandchildren, and each new generation learns something new and

different, but never all of it. It's been more than 2000 years since Jesus walked the earth; we still think we can make history turn out right if we try a little bit harder, work longer, get enough power so that we can force others to do our will!

In times like these, we need to imagine God as a vulture—soaring effortlessly in the sky patiently waiting for something to die and then casually swoop in without a fight to have a “tasty” meal. God also very patient—patiently waiting, working behind the scenes to transform the world.

It's hard to see any kind of transformation in our world. To see, really see requires the eyes of Isaiah or something with a very far-seeing perspective, like a vulture at 10,000m. Is God a vulture? God sees eternally, has chosen to work with us and creation over the long-term. God has lots of time, is patient, and moves slowly and nonviolently to bring about a new heaven and a new earth.

A vulture is patient; God is patient. God is a vulture.



**Second, God is beautiful as a vulture is beautiful.** This is a photo of a turkey vulture. Apparently, turkey vultures are found in SK. I've never seen one before. But, look at how large and very obvious its nostrils are. You can see through from one side of its head to the other. Do you find this pretty? Vultures' heads are often disproportionately small compared to their bodies. Do you think a pin-head

is attractive? Look at them—they're sitting there hunched up with their heads sunk between their shoulders like sulking teenagers! Is this an appropriate metaphor for God?

Before you answer that question, consider the other passage in Isaiah which Don read.

In chapter 53, Isaiah writes about the suffering servant who—and listen carefully—*“had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.”*



Or , consider the Paul's words in 1 Corinthians:

*not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (1 Corinthians 1:26-31)*

In the Philippians 2 passage, Paul talks about Christ coming into the world in form of a slave.

In 1 Samuel it says, *the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.'* (1 Samuel 16:7).

Our modern culture tends to have a very narrow definition of what is beautiful. We all have our stereotypes, biases, been programmed into seeing beauty in certain places and in certain ways. I wonder whether its time to expand our prescribed definitions, to see beauty in places and in things we've never seen it before. I wonder if part of faith is being attentive to what we encounter everyday: the robin, dandelions, people, buildings, feelings, pain, pleasure—and not be overcome with our assumptions about the goodness, badness, or ugliness, but rather be **interested in them and curious about them**. We could all use a bit more holy imagination! This was one of the reasons I almost fell out of my chair this week—I was so surprised to think that the word, eagle, here in Isaiah could also be a vulture. The word of God doesn't just confirm everything we already think we know, but it can surprise us too! Can you imagine seeing beauty here, and being borne on vulture's wings?



**Finally, God is life.** Just as you were coming around to seeing the beauty in vultures, I draw your attention back to what they actually do for a living. It is the vultures' job to gather around death and tear away at a bloody corpse. I admit that it's tough not



to feel revulsion at that. Then again, we are a species that also eats dead meat—often meat that has been raised inhumanly on factory farms. Most creatures have to kill to eat, but not vultures. With rare exceptions, their food has either died by natural causes or been killed by some other creature.

So, the vultures' job is to act as nature's janitors. They clean up and cleanse the mess of the natural world. **They are nature's death eaters.** They eat it, digest it, and rid the earth of the toxicity.

I wonder whether that isn't an appropriate metaphor for God too. When John saw Jesus walking towards him he said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29)! Jesus came into this world to be born like us, live like us, show us how to live in God's way, and then took all the hate and violence we could throw at him, absorbed it all so that we and creation could be healed, restored, and be made clean and whole.

Vultures are patient as God is patient. Vultures are beautiful if we are willing to see the world as God sees it. Vultures eat death so that life can continue; God consumes death and promises to restore creation to God's original intention.

*...those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like .... a vulture.*

God is a vulture. Thanks be to God!