

JAWS

TEXT: Job 40:6-24; 41:1-34

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on October 15, 2023

One of the most common ways that threat to life is portrayed in monster lore is depicting a monster not only as huge, but also with sharp, and often deformed, teeth. Monsters always kill, but also usually eat, people, often preferring the innocent, young, and pure—but in a pinch, anyone will do. Monsters are depicted as larger than life because life is what they consume.

If you remember the classic animated version of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer by Rankin and Bass; Rudolph, Yukon Cornelius, and Hermey—the elf who wanted to be a dentist—face the Abominable Snowman. They manage to dissuade the monster from eating people and convert him to being helpful and friendly. And how is that conversion depicted in the movie? With the help of Hermey’s dental skills, they remove the monster’s teeth. He is literally and figuratively defanged. Consider that the horror movie is not called “Shark.” It’s called “Jaws.”

In the passage Cathy just read from Job, God says of the beast Leviathan, “Who can open the doors of its face? There is terror all around its teeth.” I had Cathy read you those entire descriptions of the biblical monsters known as Behemoth and Leviathan because I am drawn to them like a moth to the flame.

For the context of the story, the book of Job begins by telling us that Job is blameless on the earth. But he is then visited by every kind of calamity, losing his home, his children, his riches, and finally his health. As a result, he rages at God, questions whether God cares about either him or justice more generally, and demands that God show up to tell him how any of this is fair.

None of us can live very long without having the same questions; and you’ve heard sermons from me on those other aspects of the text. But, in this moment, when God calls Job’s bluff and does indeed show up to answer the charge, two whole chapters of God’s four-chapter response to Job’s questions are about these two great and powerful beasts. It makes God sound a bit less than compassionate.

Of course, those who hear the detailed descriptions, frequently want to figure out if Behemoth and Leviathan are actual creatures that either do or once did roam the earth, or whether they are monsters of myth and legend. The consensus of those who want real-word creatures and have immersed themselves in the text is that Behemoth is a hippo and Leviathan a crocodile. A fire-breathing crocodile, but still. I tend to agree. I can’t imagine staring down a crocodile without asking the question, “Who can open the doors of its face?”

For the record, hippos are vegetarians and don’t eat people, but they do kill about 500 people a year in Africa. Crocodiles kill about a thousand people each year; and crocodiles do, in fact, eat the humans that they kill. Humans are not a croc’s preferred prey, but if we’re right there, we’ll do.

But the point of these two chapters is not to issue a call to Job to prove himself to God or others by slaying these powerful monsters. Remarkably, it’s the exact opposite. Behemoth and Leviathan are God’s creatures and I’m drawn to these verses because of the way they are brimming with God’s love and pride in them. Maybe *we* see them as monsters; but they are most definitely *God’s* monsters; and God is mighty proud of their majesty.

The first two chapters of God’s response to Job, in chapters 38 and 39, are similar, only they point to the non-animal wonders of God’s creation—the heavenly bodies, the oceans and mountains, and the earth itself. The last two chapters focus down on the animal kingdom, bringing the point closer to Job himself.

As God begins to describe Behemoth, God says, “Look at Behemoth, which I made just as I made you.” God locates Job squarely within, not above, the created order. God also says Behemoth is, “the first of the great acts of God—only its Maker can approach it with the sword.” Leviathan gets even more praise—God just can’t quit Leviathan. “I will not keep silence concerning its limbs, or its mighty strength, or its splendid frame.”

And the thing is, Leviathan’s power and danger are part of the pride God takes in the creature. “Lay hands on it; think of the battle; you will not do it again!...No one is so fierce as to dare to stir it up. Who can stand before it? Who can confront it and be safe?—under the whole heaven, who?”

The point of all of it is to place Job, and therefore all human beings, squarely within the circle of life, the great ecosystem of earth that God made as a home for both predator and prey. By highlighting that power, and the powerlessness of Job to even comprehend it, let alone conquer it in battle, the speech of God serves as a call to humility. God is God and we, most assuredly, are not.

I've argued in sermons about Job that the question of the book is not "Why do innocent people suffer?" That's the question of the character Job, and while the book condemns several wrong answers, when God shows up to answer Job's cry, it's not the question God answers.

I believe the real question is in the set-up to the book, when Satan claims that Job's righteousness is only superficial and will crumble the minute anything bad happens to him. Satan is asking, "Is it possible for good people to remain good and faithful in the face of unspeakable loss and hardship? What does it take to survive the encounters with earth's monsters with our souls, if not our bodies, intact?"

God's four-chapter speech here does answer *that* question and it's summed up in the single word, "humility." Humility is not debasement. In fact, humility is only possible when we fully grasp how each of us is beautifully and wonderfully made. Humility is what life looks like when lived with the understanding that the human vocation given to Adam to serve and protect the earth, makes people unique but not superior to all else.

In a life of humility, we not only know, but rejoice in our place in the great circle of all living beings. It's a life where we recognize and accept the limits of human knowledge and power, and acknowledge in both word and deed that our connections, even to this world's most fearsome creatures, run on an unbreakable cord through the very heart of God.

Nothing reinforces that message, as well as our failure to grasp it, quite as succinctly as watching entire cities disappear under water, homes spinning into dust in a tornado, or reading last week about a couple, who were no strangers to serious hiking in wilderness areas, being killed by a grizzly bear in Banff National Park with an empty can of bear spray found next to their bodies.

And nothing shows our lack of humility more than the fact that the park rangers, upon finding the tragic scene, then hunted and killed the bear. In a National Park. In a wilderness area. In its home. For behaving as healthy grizzlies do.

What humility teaches is that we are not God. Our place in the circle of life makes us both predators and prey, and God's charge to Adam in Genesis 2:15 gives us the job of making sure everything on earth keeps that balance—because without it, the entire project collapses. We are to take what we need, but not more; and steward all life in a way that ensures everything on earth can live out its own vocation as God intended.

We too often embrace the power of the predator but not the humility of the prey. Humans are also one of the few apex predators that prey on our own kind. When combined with the lack of humility that comes with accepting that we are also prey, we've created a vulnerability that can but lead to the extinction of homo sapiens by our own hand.

When power and vulnerability aren't balanced equally among us, as people, the list of who is allowed to be a predator grows smaller and the list of people who are prey grows larger. In the end, a single individual of a single predator species can press the button that destroys everything God charged us to protect.

The way we more frequently talk about that inequity is with the language of "dehumanization." Those who study fascism and authoritarianism have long told us that one of the early steps toward genocide is describing other people as animals—beasts, brutes, savages. We "dehumanize" them, putting them in a category that is less than human.

We'll talk more in depth about that next week, but this week I want to make the point that even the language of "dehumanization" itself can perpetuate the problem, since it pumps up human pride.

The reason that some people feel free to attack, torture, kill, and drive to extinction a certain group of people in a genocide is that they have been taught to view those people as animals. But that tactic only works in a world where

people feel like it's okay to attack, torture, kill, and obliterate animals, and that the extinction of an entire species is secondary to the growth of human society and wealth.

The Bible is crystal clear that it is not okay—from the get-go when God made everything and called it all “good,” to specifically directing Adam and Eve to care for it as stewards, to saving two of everything on Noah’s ark, to God’s absolute love for both the prey of the lost sheep and the cattle on a thousand hills as well as the awe-inducing power of Behemoth, the first of God’s great works. God made them all.

Maybe I’ve missed it, but I don’t think there’s any chapter in the Bible where God goes on about the wonder of humans in the way God goes on here in Job in dizzying delight over Leviathan.

I’m not remembering any place in the Bible where God expresses regret for having made sharks or tigers or bears. But God has to be talked out of completely destroying humans multiple times. In the Bible, it’s humans who are punished by God for not stewarding all life with equity and justice.

If we had enough humility to see the animal kingdom as “part of” rather than “less than” the societies of humans, genocidal dictators would have to work a good bit harder to convince us to murder each other in cold blood.

What if, instead of talking about “dehumanizing” others—which by definition applies only to people—we talked about “desacralizing.” What if all life was seen as sacred—as the good and holy creation that God made—and we called out any time a person, corporation, state, or nation desacralized something as a dangerous step toward dumping toxins into the circle of life we all share?

You can’t “dehumanize” the Amazon Rain Forest. But it has been desacralized for years, as we have clearcut the lungs of the world for profit. And humans along with everything else are suffering from the climate disruptions which that desacralization created.

You can’t “dehumanize” wolves. But when they are desacralized with total disregard for their habitat; when ranchers can’t work with conservationists to minimize losses of both predators and prey; when people think the pelt or head of a wolf would make a fine adornment to their home, the disappearance of that apex predator in a region destroys the entire ecosystem.

Without the wolves, the deer population rises to unsustainable levels. Over-competition for food for the deer then leaves trees stripped of their leaves and bark, which destroys habitat for smaller woodland animals and birds, which makes the eagles, hawks, and falcons look elsewhere for food. The lack of deer carcasses from wolf kills eliminates the food source for scavengers, and the next thing you know you have only a plague of insects on depleted soil.

Between 1800 and 1900, the bison population in the great plains of the United States was slaughtered, trains slowing down so people could shoot them more easily and in greater numbers sometimes even stopping so that passengers could skin them and take the skins back home to sell, leaving the meat from these sacred animals to rot in massive piles.

The bison population dropped in those years from an estimated 30-60 million to approximately 325. By the 1930’s the area was known as a dust bowl and great human suffering ensued. Too much carbon in the atmosphere is not the only way to kill a planet.

We humans have turned the great circle of life into a circular firing squad, and time is running out to make the transformative changes we need for life to continue. But there is still hope. God’s wisdom in creating a planet that is itself a part of the thriving organism whose life beats within, upon, and above it makes the earth responsive to acts of healing as well as acts of harm.

There was nothing quite as obvious in the initial pandemic lockdowns in 2020 as the incredible rate at which part of the earth went about healing wounded places. When cars stopped roaring along the roads and industrial smokestacks stopped their belching, within mere weeks people in cities that reeked with smog could suddenly see the beauty of the surrounding mountains against the sapphire sky.

Coyotes, mountain lions, and bears roamed contentedly along the streets of towns and villages as people marveled at their beauty and cleverness, shooting them with cameras instead of guns. Social media was flooded with animals as sacred signs of life rather than trophies on a wall.

Rabbits and squirrels, raccoons and possums were still picked off by hungry eagles and hawks; but they were no longer flattened as roadkill by those who couldn't be bothered to watch for them or consider that their lives, too, might matter to the One who made them; that their lives, too, might have their own meaning and purpose in the circle of life, just as we have ours.

We can live differently, if we have the will. We can take up the unique place and vocation God has given to human beings in the circle of life. Even if we learn to see just one other being as sacred, human or non, the light of that truth can spread to other beings like a wildfire until our souls are teeming with love for the entire circle.

That lesson might be learning to see the life of a human enemy as sacred; it might be moving a turtle out of the road to a safe place; it might be looking at a crocodile and crying out with God's loving amazement, "Who can open the doors of its face?!" rather than wondering how much money you could get for its skin. God will pay us for the skin of Leviathan, but maybe not the kind of payment we want. Amen.