

The Geese and the Cranes

A World Communion Sunday Sermon on Isaiah 40:27-31—Adam E. Eckhart
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1. Aesop wrote: “The Geese and the Cranes were feeding in the same meadow, when a bird catcher came to ensnare them in his nets. The Cranes, being light of wing, fled away at his approach; while the Geese, being slower of flight and heavier in their bodies, were captured.”ⁱ

I’d like to say that Aesop was inaccurate when he wrote this fable, but I have met a few geese, and a few cranes, and think he’s on to something. For the last year, my family has lived in the Senior Pastor parsonage, a spacious house but on an island unto itself where our closest neighbors are ducks and geese residing on the lower duck pond. The most notorious—I mean, popular—residents though are the indigent geese.

These geese sustain themselves on a steady diet of slightly stale bread supplied by people who drive downtown, feed the geese, and then return to their homes far away from the results of their actions. The soggy truth is that the Wonder Bread not only isn’t part of the geese’s natural diet (not that they seems to care, they gorge themselves on what amounts to junk food to them); it also contributes to their unnatural girth and inability to fly. I’m pretty sure that they don’t want to leave Milford, but if they wanted to, I don’t know if they the biological memory is still there—so many years have gone by since any of them flew that even the ones with good wings might not know what to do.

Just outside the city limits of Baraboo, Wisconsin, where my parents live, sits

former farmland converted in the 1970s by two Cornell-trained ornithologists (bird experts) into the International Crane Foundation. It is the only place where you can see all 15 living species of cranes in one location. There endangered species such as the whooping crane have been bred in captivity to ensure the continuation of the species. Even with their spacious living quarters, the cranes in cannot fly in captivity, but when they jump about and spread their wings you know that one flap would be instant liftoff. They are the oldest birds still in existence, traced back at least 45 million years through fossils, and there was no need apparently for them to evolve since then because they are slim, light, graceful birds, able to migrate epic distances as the seasons change. One crane species migrates over the Himalayan Mountains. It’s no wonder that numerous cultures the world over have revered the crane as a symbol of beauty, good luck, divinity, and long life (legend said that they could live to be 1,000 years old; the oldest crane recorded was actually only 80, but still very old for a bird). They can fly with peace and endurance.

Quick nimble flying cranes and slow, lethargic flightless geese.

2. Today, God through Isaiah uses lofty language to encourage God’s people to soar with wings like eagles or perhaps like cranes. The Jewish people of Judah, southern Israel, had seventy years previously been conquered by the Babylonians. Many of the Jewish leaders

had been exiled to faraway Babylon, to keep them from leading a rebellion. The Jewish people had been struggling before the defeat and exile, but at least they were together then. The Babylonians had disrupted the Hebrews' wholeness, their shalom, their peace.

The exiles in particular had to become accustomed to a new way of living apart from their homeland. They likely had to hear constant messages of how they had lost to their oppressors. They lived in a land where forgiveness and mercy were ideas for softies, where the people ate different food, spoke a different language, worshiped different gods. The Hebrews didn't fit there: they felt alienated.

You can imagine how little hope and faith and peace remained in the exiles' souls. Then the original exiles die, and their children haven't even seen their homeland. Between holding out hope that God would bring them back home, and the resignation that God had forgotten them or was punishing them forever, the resignation started to become easier to swallow than faith. It didn't nourish their spirits to give up on God, but it started to taste better. So even some of God's most faithful leaders from Jerusalem began to eat and be weighed down by despair, hopelessness and doubt.

3. We experience our own brand of exile, alienation; we too are attracted to spiritual junk food as we vainly seek in to fill spiritual void. Some of us live far from our families—for the sake of a career, to escape family conflict, or because the rest of the family moved away. In this, we lose a vital dimension of our identity. In our busy culture, we struggle to nurture community based on trust, love and peace.

We want our machines to get us from point A to point B as quickly as possible. Twice in the past two weeks I've almost been hit by a car while trying to cross the street by the duck pond. At least the geese squawk sympathetically at me—they know what it's like to evade speeding cars.

Like the geese, we are presented with alluring junk food. Not physical junk food, not wonder bread, although there's that too; instead, I'm talking about things that screens that beckon us all hours of the day—check your text messages and your emails; just one more episode of Orange is the New Black; one more baseball game. What silly thing did that politician say today? Yum yum yum, It may not matter but it goes down so easy! I'll regret wasting my time tomorrow but for now it's wonderful! Or we cultivate such a spirit of cutthroat competition in our hearts or the hearts of our children that we are always worried about whether we or our children are surpassing everyone else. We cultivate a spirit of them vs. us, alienation, a lack of peace. It feels good to strive to win but there's a limit before we stop caring about the wider community and only about what's in it for us. Spiritual junk food weighs us down; it also distracts us from the ways that our world is substantially broken. We may not notice how undernourished our spirits are, how heavy laden our hearts are aimlessness when we fill our time and concern with things that don't cultivate hope or peace.

4. But we'll notice the heaviness or lightness of our spirits when the moment comes to fly.

In Isaiah 40 the news comes that the Babylonians have been defeated and that the exiles can return home! Isaiah says to

the Hebrew people, “Make the path straight through the wilderness and the dessert for God.” Isaiah understands that God, who has remained in Jerusalem, is now reaching out for the exiles in Babylon to return to their homeland. And it is in that moment of potential return, or potential rekindled hope, that Isaiah says, look, you’re being called back home. But even young people can grow weary and exhausted—especially if they have not stretched their spirits, especially if they have only consumed the junk food of despair and self-pity. In those cases, even a spiritual 5K run will tire them out. But those who look to God, who have been nourished by their faith, will have the endurance to return and adapt. Those people run and not faint; even better, they will be able to soar as though they have wings as they reunite with their homeland and their people. Those people, even if they are chronologically old, are prepared for shalom, restoration and peace.

‘Come back to where you belong,’ God says, ‘fly with endurance; fly with me, your God. Take wing right away, you can do it. Don’t just listen to my words of peace, embody them, become that hope and peace. Fly! Soar!’

Were the exiles ready when God’s call came to them to return to Jerusalem? We do know that many of the exiles did in a spirit of shalom and hopefulness return back to Jerusalem. They needed hope and peace to face the exceeding challenges of rebuilding a broken city and a broken society. But between the exiles and the ones left behind they possessed enough faith that God would lead them that they found the grace and courage to rebuild the temple and the society that God called them to cultivate. It took a lot of work, a lot of endurance, but in time they received

a new shalom, a new peace, that blessed them for years to come.

5. Do we have the capacity to lay down the burdens and weights that threaten to ground us? Have we neglected the peace that God offers us or have we accessed the peace within and around us that enables us to fly?

The International Crane Foundation partnered recently with other ecological groups to reintroduce whooping cranes into the Wisconsin to Florida migratory pattern. But they didn’t know at first how to get the cranes to fly and to fly in the right direction. They didn’t have the internal GPS needed to fly 1,000 miles southeast and land in the nesting grounds that could sustain them. But then they heard about a new strategy used with sandhill cranes and adapted it to whooping cranes. Scientist oversaw a migration using an ultralight, you know, one of those hang gliders with propellers, to lead the way for the whooping cranes. The pilots had to wear crane costumes while flying so that the cranes would trust them, but with endurance and determination they made it all the way to Florida, and made sure that the once captive birds integrated with wild ones so that in the spring they all flew back together to the Midwest.

I think that like our geese neighbors, or like those captive whooping cranes we who have forgotten how to live fully in peace and hope still have the capacity for flight. It just takes the winds of the Holy Spirit to lift us up again and God to show us the flight path of peace and hope.

Seventy years previously two bombs were dropped on Japan to end World War II.

What could have been the grounds for lingering hatred and animosity, though, was transformed into a dedication to peace in this world. In no small part due to the story of a child, Sadako, whose hope for peace and healing was embodied in folding 1,000 paper cranes, the prayer for peace reverberated across the globe so that children and congregations like ours echo back her prayer with our own prayers for peace in our time. We folded 1,000 plus sheets of origami paper into the cranes that fly above us and nest in our chancel this morning! Origami is a transformational art form—you don't add to or take away from the paper, you simply reform it into a new thing. Perhaps God takes us and transforms us in God's

¹ Aesop's Fables, included in *The Quality of Cranes*, by Betsy Didrickson, page 51.

peaceful image through Christian ministry and worship. We are transformed when we get to practice peace by shaking hands in love and listening to a pastor preach Good News nonviolently; we are transformed when we serve God and neighbor in peace; we are transformed when we partake the juice and the bread that does not weigh us down but frees us to live in peace with all God's sisters and brothers.

God transforms us from flightless to soaring cranes and geese, eagles and angels, through the undying love of Christ. We may be humans, but God intends us to fly in peace, in hope, in beauty and in love. Amen.