

## **His Eye Is On the Gila Monster**

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*Based on Job 12:7-10. The Wisdom of the Animals*

I noticed the animals right away as my sabbatical pilgrimage began in earnest.

The bald eagle in Pennsylvania. The heron in Ohio. The wild turkey in Missouri. I made note of them in my journal and looked up their indigenous spiritual meaning in my well-loved copy of *Animal Speak*, by Ted Andrews.

According to Andrews, the eagle signals spiritual clarity, expanded perspective, and newfound freedom. The heron is stillness and patience. The turkey is abundance, generosity, and communal harvest. All of which resonated on a prayerful pilgrimage to revisit specific places that have been formative in my journey through ministry.

This was the second half of my sabbatical, on my way to Tucson, Arizona, with a stated goal of making peace with an abusive experience in a congregation I served there seventeen years ago. I was ready to reclaim all that had been good from the experience: learning about immigration and border ministry; crafting creative worship; indigenous and Mexican cultures; the amazing food; and my best friend.

Like anyone who has survived an abusive experience, though, my mind and heart were a whirlwind. For me, the story of Job offers meaningful parallels. A good and righteous man who, through no fault of his own, all of a sudden has the life kicked out from under him. He is in great physical and spiritual and psychic pain with no end in sight. Job's so-called friends insist HE is the one with the problem. They insist he repent. Job knows he is not the problem. Repent for what, he insists right back. But even so, Job is not quite sure what to do about his suffering other than to cry out to God, beg for help, and demand the explanation we all want to know when we suffer unjustly: WHY?!?!?!?

The great mystic Meister Eckhart says *the only way to live is like the rose, which lives without a why*. Which is great in theory. A lot harder in practice.

But the animals were with me on the sabbatical pilgrimage last spring. The eagle's newfound freedom unfolded before me as the journey began. The heron's stillness enveloped me, as I let go of everything but the journey to come. The turkey's generosity — through the sabbatical grant and the cards and small gifts you paced out for

me to open along the way — encouraged me each mile down the road.

I did find a certain measure of peace. Just driving. Another white dash flying beneath me. The playlist blaring from the stereo. Rays of light streaming through the open sunroof. I bought myself a rose. I tried to live like it.

Then came the great soul suck that is southwestern Kansas. Like thousands of pioneers before me, I had to make a choice along the Santa Fe Trail. Take the longer route into Colorado with greater assurance of food and water and vegetation. Or the shorter route through Dodge City and the Oklahoma panhandle with less water and greater exposure to danger.

Why I chose the more direct, more dangerous route when I was on sabbatical and not tied to a clock is beyond me! But I did.

The tornado picked back up with a vengeance. As I sank into the soil where thousands of pioneers before me had called it quits, I thought I, too, may have made a mistake. I just wanted to come back home.

Then came the elk of New Mexico. Stamina, strength, and endurance for the long haul. They travel in herds and protect one another. The bull snake of Sedona. Transformation, shedding what no longer serves, regeneration, power. It transforms what is held close, rather than poisoning its victim. The Gila Monster of Canyon Ranch. Patient, deliberate, ancient. It conserves its energy completely, moving only when necessary and full of intention.

Listen to the animals, Job said to me on my journey. They will teach you. The birds of the air. They will tell you.

God's eye is on the gila monster. Yes, God watches me.

As with Job, God did not fix my suffering or explain it away with religious platitudes. As with Job, God did not condemn me for sinning or rescue me by striking down the ones I blamed for what hurt. As with Job, God simply fixed my gaze from the whirlwind toward the bigger picture: the Grand Canyon with its 2 billion year history of rock layers; the Arizona sunset with its unfiltered awe; the ultra sensitive tarantula tuning in to its inner voice; the javelina standing its ground without apology; the roadrunner protecting against evil spirits.

Who am I, I wondered along with Job, to think I know anything about the ways of God? Such mystery is beyond my comprehension, even with that fancy Ivy League Master of Divinity degree — perhaps especially with that fancy Ivy League Master of Divinity degree. I can only stand in awe and point.

There is a moment in the spiritual life, or at least there has been for me, when all that we think we are, and all

that we think we have, and all that we think we know — about ourselves, about others, about God — gets stripped down to nothing. We call it the *via negativa*, the way of negation.

Desert spirituality knows this way of negation well. There is no language to meditate. No images to contemplate. No vegetation to soften the landscape, no water to soothe the soul, no shade to hide in. Just the bare truth of what remains when everything else is gone. Which is a steadfast love from everlasting to everlasting and a timeless peace that passes all understanding.

And that is enough.

God does not answer Job — and God did not answer me — from the comfortable place. God often answers us from the whirlwind. Not with an explanation for our suffering — or even a removal of that suffering — but with an encounter of grace.

Job's story concludes with humility in the vastness of God's creation. And then with gratitude for the gift of grace even in his personal suffering within that creation. And then with compassion for others who also suffer. Unbelievably, Job's story concludes with a prayer for the very fair weather friends who had increased his unjust suffering by blaming him for it.

That right there is the miracle. Job has compassion even for the ones who have hurt him.

My story is moving in that direction, as well. Compassion for those who hurt me. Not as a forced forgiveness that stuffs the suffering and prays for them from a martyr mentality, oh, woe is me, I can bear it (when I can't). My compassion, like Job's, is moving toward a genuine reverence for the mystery of grace and a heartfelt hope for the healing and forgiveness that become possible when we stick with the spiritual journey long enough to find peace in the whirlwind.

If you are in the whirlwind and need to know that peace, I am here for you as your pastor. Your church family is here for you, too. We can walk through the whirlwind together.

In the meantime, the gift of the journey is before us all: an invitation to live with the animals, *a la* Walt Whitman. Placid and self-contained. Not sweating or whining about our condition. Not lying awake in the dark and weeping for our sins, dissatisfied or demented with the mania of things. But simply being who we are.

Living life on life's terms. Praying for all who suffer. And being grateful.