

**Notes for Children's Talk & Sermon Outline for
Sunday, 8 November 2020**

Children's Talk: What We Can Learn By Looking at Birds

- Why are we looking at birds in church?
- The Lord did say that we could learn something spiritual by looking at birds.
 - Matthew 6:25-26 (NKJV)
 - ²⁵ "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"
- This principle is true of all animals and actually everything in the natural world.
 - In the last two weeks we've shown you rocks and plants.
 - Now, here are some animals—what's different about them?
 - (They seem more alive.)
 - (More able to do things and decide things.)
- Let's see what spiritual things we can figure out by focussing on birds.
- Birds are like thoughts.
 - They seem to fly in and out of our minds.
 - They can fly quite high.
 - They can be beautiful.
 - They can be noisy—certain thoughts can dominate your attention.
 - They can come in large flocks of thoughts.
 - The thoughts and feelings in us seem to have a life of their own.
 - We can't control them exactly.
 - It's more like we are a whole world—we have a whole ecosystem within us.
- We do have choices about what conditions we create within ourselves.
 - In the parable of the mustard seed, what happens once the mustard seed grows into a big tree? (Matthew 13:31-32)
 - It becomes a place for birds to come and nest.
- What things can you do to attract birds?
 - What do these birds like?
 - Put out birdseed.
 - Put a birdbath.
 - Clean up rubbish.
 - My brother has a piece of land that he's been working on for a bunch of years.
 - Putting in more plants and fruit trees.
 - And removing things that are harmful.
 - In the last few years a beautiful bird called an indigo bunting started showing up.
 - He didn't make that bird come but he created conditions that allowed for it.
- What can you do inside yourself to make good conditions for good spiritual animals to live?
- *Amen.*

Nature, Part 3: Animals & Ecosystems

A Sermon by Pastor Malcolm G. Smith
8 November 2020

Intro

- Sir Hans Sloane was a well-known physician, naturalist, and collector who lived in the 1600 and 1700s and his collection helped to found the British Museum, British Library, and Natural History Museum in London.
- Something that you can't find on the Wikipedia page for Hans Sloane but you can find in the teachings of the New Church, is that, after he died, he had an argument in the spiritual world about whether things in the natural world like seeds and eggs get their power and energy to grow from nature or from God continually flowing in.
- The argument was resolved in a really interesting way.
- *Divine Love and Wisdom* §344:1-2

- To settle the argument, a beautiful bird appeared to Sir Hans, and he was told to examine it to see whether it differed in any least particular from a similar bird on earth. Sir Hans held it in his hand, examined it, and said that there was no difference. He was told to do this, because he knew that it was only the affection of some angel in his vicinity represented as a bird, and that it would vanish or cease to exist along with the angel's affection, as also happened.

As a result of this experiment Sir Hans was convinced that nature contributes nothing whatever to the productions of plants and animals, but that they are attributable solely to that which flows from the spiritual world into the natural one.

[For more about the implications of this passage, watch the Rev. Andrew Heilman's presentation at the Theistic Science Symposium at Bryn Athyn College in 2019, "Conservation is Perpetual Creation" here: <https://bit.ly/38jB15F>. Or read the article version here: <https://bit.ly/36ceODY>.]

- The implications of this passage are that these birds that we've been looking at here today (and any bird or animal that you've ever seen) only exists because there is a corresponding thought or affection flowing in from the spiritual world .
 - Somewhere in the spiritual world you would find birds that look exactly like these ones we've seen here and it would be clear to you—just like it was to Hans Sloane—that those birds only exist because of people nearby having corresponding thoughts or affections.
- We've been doing this series on nature for a couple of weeks and talking about how everything in the mineral kingdom and everything in the vegetable kingdom are the result of spiritual things flowing in so we shouldn't be surprised to find that this principle also applies to the animal kingdom, which we're talking about today.
- But, because the creatures of the animal kingdom are so much more alive, autonomous, and interactive than rocks and plants, it's worth taking the time to get more of an understanding of how this spiritual flowing in works at this next, higher level of Creation.
- There are lots of interesting implications that come from thinking about the animal kingdom in light of spiritual principles.
 - I will by no means be exhausting this topic.
 - There are so many cool implications to think about and wonder about.

- I may end up leaving you with more questions than answers but my hope is that this will give you a new and intriguing perspective from which to look at animals so that you can do lots of your own pondering and drawing of connections.
- You might be wondering where human beings fit in with all of this.
 - In what ways are human beings the same as animals and in what ways are they different?
 - And what is the role and responsibility of human beings in the natural world?
 - Those are good questions and so we decided yesterday to add a sermon to this series that Joel will do next week about human beings in the natural world.
- Today, we'll be talking first about why animals exist.
 - Then we'll talk about the incredible diversity in the animal kingdom.
 - And finally we'll talk about harmful animals.

Why Do Animals Exist?

- So why do animals exist?
- What's the typical materialistic explanation or the typical explanation in the world based on what can be observed in the natural world?
- There is a highly complex story that's told about life evolving from bacteria to multi-celled organisms and eventually to human beings over billions of years.
- It's a really cool explanation and it may well be largely true but the thing it lacks—at least in my mind—is an adequate explanation of why.
 - Why did life start in the first place?
 - Why did that life evolve into ever more complex creatures?
- And it's interesting when you listen to people explain the story because they can hardly avoid ascribing purpose and intention.
 - They'll say things like, "Life finds a way."
 - Ok. But what is that life that's doing that finding of ways?
 - How does it know how to find a way?
 - You can talk about evolution and mutation and natural selection but all of that is in the realm of explaining *how* not *why*.
- The teachings of the New Church provide a why.
 - *Divine Love and Wisdom* §170
 - The grand purpose, or the purpose of all elements of creation, is an eternal union of the Creator with the created universe. This is not possible unless there are subjects in which His divinity can be at home, so to speak, subjects in which it can dwell and abide. For these subjects to be His dwellings and homes they must be receptive of his love and wisdom, as if they were doing this of their own accord, subjects who will with apparent autonomy raise themselves toward the Creator and unite themselves with Him. In the absence of this reciprocity, there is no union.

These subjects are human beings who can raise themselves and unite with apparent autonomy.

Through this union, the Lord is present in every work He has created, since in the last analysis everything has been created for the sake of human beings. As a result, the functions of all created things rise level by level from the lowest things to us, and through us to God the Creator, their source....

- The Lord created the universe with the purpose of creating beings outside of Himself that He could love and bless (see *True Christianity* §43) and so everything in creation serves that purpose in some way or other.
- Life evolved because God created everything with an impulse to be more and more responsive to the Lord.
 - Human beings are the full realisation of that potential.
- The Lord is, was, and always will be the driving force behind everything in Creation.
 - His love and wisdom, His purposes and His wisdom about how to achieve those purposes are in every detail of the natural world.
 - And so we read,
 - *Apocalypse Explained* §1199:2
 - [T]here is not a hair or fibre of wool on any beast, or a filament of a quill or feather upon any bird, or a point of a fin or scale on any fish, that is not from the life of their soul, thus that is not from the spiritual clothed by the natural.
 - And
 - *Apocalypse Explained* §1215:3-4
 - Nature produces nothing from itself, but merely in the process of production serves the spiritual... as an instrumental cause serves its principal cause, or as a dead force serves its living force. This makes clear how mistaken those are who ascribe the generations of animals and the productions of plants to nature. This is the same as ascribing magnificent and splendid works to the tool and not to the workman....
- Animals exist because the Lord created them and is continuing to create them every moment because they serve the use—in a whole myriad of ways—of helping people to love the Lord and other people.
- So evolution and other scientific theories and discoveries can explain how things seem to have developed but the reason why they developed can truly be explained only by the existence of a loving and wise Creator.
- To me, this is actually a simpler explanation than saying that life and all its development just randomly happened to happen.
 - Is it really more believable that the tools that happened to be there just happened to work together in all sorts of intricate ways to create an incredibly beautiful and functional system for a massive number of diverse things to be able to work together.
 - Or maybe someone was using those tools intentionally to build what we see.
- So the next time you see some amazing symbiotic relationship between two animals or some animal that just happens to be evolved with exactly the right body parts to be able to open a particular fruit, you can consider that maybe that's because there are some particular affections and thoughts in the spiritual world that work really well together and that's what led to those animals or that animal and that plant emerging in the natural world in a way so well suited to each other.

The Diversity of the Animal Kingdom

- Now that we've talked about where animals came from, let's talk about the incredible diversity in the animal kingdom.
- Here is the description of days five and six from the Creation story in Genesis chapter 1:
 - Genesis 1:20-25 (NKJV)
 - ²⁰ Then God said, "Let the waters abound with an abundance of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the face of the firmament of the heavens."
 - ²¹ So God created great sea creatures and every living thing that moves, with which the waters abounded, according to their kind, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." ²³ So the evening and the morning were the fifth day.
 - ²⁴ Then God said, "Let the earth bring forth the living creature according to its kind: cattle and creeping thing and beast of the earth, each according to its kind"; and it was so. ²⁵ And God made the beast of the earth according to its kind, cattle according to its kind, and everything that creeps on the earth according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.
- When I think of animals I tend to first think of warmblooded land animals, like mammals—dogs, cats, lions, zebra, but also pandas and beavers and armadillos and sloths and wallabies and moles and polar bears.
- But the waters also do abound with an abundance of living creatures.
 - Huge schools of fish, tons of crabs, mollusks, jellyfish, sea stars, massive whales, all the weird and wonderful creatures from way down deep in the ocean.
- And then there are so many interesting different types of birds—the birds we're used to seeing and hearing around our neighbourhoods, to majestic raptors that can see long distances and dive at incredible speed, to seabirds that migrate huge distances, to birds of paradise that do elaborate dances, to weaver birds that build amazing nests.
- And that's still forgetting "everything that creeps on the earth"—the goggas and nunus, the ant colonies and bee hives, the caterpillars that miraculously turn into butterflies and the huge swarms of flying ants that we see at this time of year,
 - About 900 thousand species of insects have been identified and people estimate that there are somewhere between two million and thirty million species that have not yet been discovered ("Numbers of Insects (Species and Individuals)" Smithsonian Institution - <https://www.si.edu/spotlight/buginfo/bugnos>).
 - And certain studies suggest that there more than two hundred million insects for each human being on the planet and the world holds about 130kgs of insects for every 1kg of human (*Ibid.*)
- You get the point: it is truly mind-blowing how many different animals there are and how diverse they are.
- The question is what is all of that for?
 - One thing I think it does is it gives us a little glimpse into the mind and creativity of God.
 - If I'm trying to brainstorm ideas, I run out of things at around twelve ideas.
 - The Lord is still going strong with new species ideas at thirty million plus.
 - In that way I think it also give us a bit of a sense of the Lord's infinity.
 - There is technically a finite number of animals on Earth but it certainly feels like it could be an infinite number.

- And you don't get the sense that the Lord is running out of steam or even working particularly hard to create all of this and sustain all of it.
 - Studies estimate that there are around twenty quintillion animals alive on earth at the moment ("Number of Animals on Earth" by Ben Team - <https://animals.mom.com/kingdom-animals-1131.html>).
 - That's a 2 with nineteen zeroes after it.
 - The Lord is keeping that many animals alive and still He says that not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from our Father's will (Matthew 10:29).
- Imagining that can give us a little bit of a sense of the Lord's amazing omnipotence.
- In a similar way, reflecting on the vast diversity in the natural world can give us some sense of just how vast and diverse the spiritual world is.
 - Think about it, if every single detail of every single thing on earth comes from something in the spiritual world, then that means that the spiritual world has to be at least as diverse as the natural world, if not more so.
 - And that's good to know because a lot of ideas of heaven in popular culture have it being white and floaty and boring.
 - But it can't be like that if it's the source of all this amazing diversity on earth.
- Another thing it does is it gives us a picture of the complexity and diversity of the spiritual lives of different people.
- If all these animals are manifestations of various thoughts and affections, think of how many different thoughts and affections they represent.
 - Like in the animal kingdom, there are broad categories into which you can sort the different thoughts and feelings but there is still so much complexity within those broad categories.
 - Take, for example, feelings of grief.
 - There are certain commonalities between all feelings of grief but there also is a huge variety in the feelings of grief that people experience—there are many sub-species of grief, if you will.
 - I think it's just a valuable way of thinking about the thoughts and feelings we experience because it might be that we're even in the same family but I experience quite different feelings of grief from you.
 - That doesn't mean that either person is wrong; it just means that we're encountering different species of grief.
 - Maybe what I'm encountering has a longer tail and bigger ears.
 - That's good to know and it probably won't exactly match the description of the species of grief that you're encountering.

What About Harmful Animals?

- The last general topic I want to talk a little bit about is what we might call harmful animals.
- We don't just encounter gentle and harmless animals on earth, do we?
 - We also encounter things like mosquitoes and Komodo dragons.
 - Did the Lord create these?
 - Do they correspond with angelic thoughts and affections?
- No, it's probably pretty obvious that these harmful animals are an expression of the influence of hell.
- From the beginning, the Lord only created useful animals but, once people turned away from following the Lord, then the influence of hell produced harmful animals on earth, as

manifestations of harmful thoughts and feelings (*Divine Love and Wisdom* §339; *Apocalypse Explained* §1201:3).

- They represent a twisting and perversion of the life flowing in from the Lord inasmuch as they cause harm to people and to other animals.
- But, even these harmful animals and harmful plants still must perform a use, just like even the lowest evil spirit in hell must serve a use.
 - We read that these harmful animals are still called forms of use because they are of use to evil people in doing evil but they also are “serviceable in absorbing malignities and thus also as remedies” (*Divine Love and Wisdom* §336).
 - And another passages says that savage beasts “nevertheless serve a use” (*Married Love* §392).
- I think the role of nastier animals in ecosystems is a really cool picture of how the Lord can use harmful things from hell in really useful ways.
 - You may have heard about how people reintroduced wolves to Yellowstone National Park and it meant that the elk and deer populations were reduced and that they could no longer wander wherever they wanted and eat whatever they wanted.
 - That then allowed certain trees that they had been devouring to grow up again which meant that there was more food available for beavers so there were more beavers and then more beaver dams which meant that the fish in the rivers had more places to reproduce and their populations started to recover.
 - We have to think through the implications of this carefully.
 - I don’t think it means that the savagery of wolves tearing up some animal that they’ve caught corresponds to something good; that’s still a manifestation of something hellish.
 - But lions and wolves in the Bible can have a good signification.
 - There’s even a passage that talks about a wolf seizing and devouring the prey and that signifying the Lord rescuing and delivering good people (*Secrets of Heaven* §§6441-6442).
 - So certain aspects of an animal’s quality or actions can signify something good.
 - What about in our own spiritual ecosystems—what are the implications there?
 - I don’t think we should conclude from this that sometimes we need some evil in there to keep things balanced.
 - No, we should be working to eradicate evil as much as we can within ourselves to make it a safe habitat for good thoughts and feelings.
 - But the Lord did say to His disciples, “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (Matthew 10:16).
 - We are meant to do what’s kind but also what’s true and useful.
 - We are meant to be compassionate but we also must pursue justice.
 - If we are too gentle and kind all the time it’s like our ecosystem is going to be overrun with cute little bunny rabbits that are going to keep multiplying and multiplying and they will actually eventually become a very destructive force.
 - Again, I don’t think the takeaway from this is that sometimes we need to be a bit evil and vicious—no.
 - But there should be place in our spiritual ecosystem for looking out for ourselves and doing things that feel good and protecting ourselves from other people just walking all over us.

Conclusion

- Like I said at the beginning, I'm probably raising more questions than I'm answering, particularly for those that understand biology a whole lot better than I do.
- But I do think that the animal kingdom, with all its different creatures and their amazing interactions and relationships, is an incredibly rich area for reflection on spiritual dynamics within ourselves and in the world around us.
- And it's also an amazing window in the mind and heart of our loving Creator.
- I want to end with a familiar passage from the prophet Isaiah which presents a beautiful image of what the animal kingdom could be like and what our inner animal kingdom could be like when the Lord is allowed to be in charge.

- Isaiah 11:6-9 (NKJV)

- 6 The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb,
The leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
The calf and the young lion and the fatling together;
And a little child shall lead them.
- 7 The cow and the bear shall graze;
Their young ones shall lie down together;
And the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
- 8 The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole,
And the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den.
- 9 They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain,
For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD
As the waters cover the sea.

- *Amen.*