

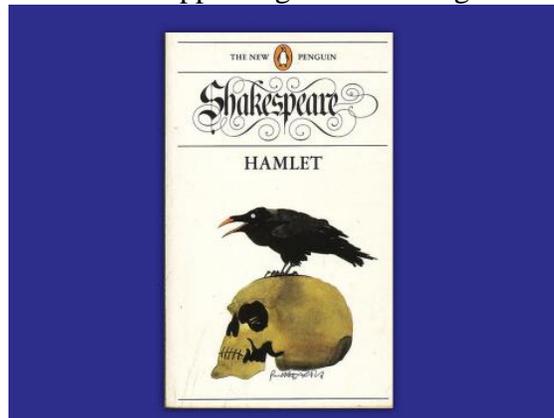
I. Intro: Today we're talking about the raven as one of the birds of the Bible

A. So if you were here before, which bird in our series appealed to you less: the vulture 2 weeks ago, or the raven today?

1. They're both pretty big birds, both feed on dead animals, and both carry a rather morbid reputation
2. So before looking at ravens specifically in the Bible, let's take stock of some of the conceptions and images we bring with us about ravens.

B. What cultural images of ravens do we bring to this Sunday? What kinds of places do ravens haunt in our imaginations?

1. There are many places where we could start, such as with literature besides the Bible
 - a) You might think of ravens appearing in the writings of Shakespeare,



such as in Hamlet

- b) Or maybe the great Victorian author Charles Dickens ... Did you know he had a pet raven named Grip? How many of you have a pet raven?



2. In today's world films and TV series may color our images of ravens even more than literature:

Texts: 1 Kings 17:1-6; Lk 12:22-26

(Consider the birds: Raven) 2



a) There have been 3 or 4 film versions of Edgar Allen Poe’s famous poem *The Raven*, starting as early as 1909

b) Many of you my age and older will remember not 1 but 2 Disney animated films with evil women characters who had loyal pet ravens:

(1) In *Snow White and the 7 Dwarves*, from 1937, it was the evil Queen Grimhilde



(2) And then the 1959 film *Sleeping Beauty* had Maleficent, with her raven named Diablo ... which was remade 5 years ago under the movie name *Maleficent*



c) In more recent years I’ve read that the fantasy TV series *Game of Thrones* used a 3-eyed raven as a messenger bird

3. So in the popular mind the raven comes to us often as a sinister, dark bird ... loyal ... clever ... linked with death

II. Are these images true of real-world ravens? And do ravens appear the same way in the Bible?

A. We know that ravens eat roadkill, like vultures

1. But ravens don't kill most of what they eat, so they hang around wolves and coyotes a lot when they're feeding

But as you might guess, bigger predators do not just kindly abandon or share their prized meals with ravens. So how do ravens get meat when other predators are guarding the treasure? They outsmart



them, that's how.

B. This is one of the most important characteristics of ravens: **They are known as the smartest birds in the world**

1. Ounce for ounce of body weight, raven brains are almost as large as human brains ... so they are comparable to chimps in intelligence
2. How do scientists know that ravens are so smart? Several ways:

a) They show the ability to consider the future ...

(1) Contrary to what it says in Luke 12:22, ravens DO have storehouses. They often hide extra food in trees or crevices or rocks ... and they can remember multiple hiding places

(2) If you haven't seen ravens doing this, it's because they pay attention to being watched, and if they know their storehouses will be discovered by other birds, they relocate them

b) Ravens show their smarts by solving problems through logic ... they are capable of simple adding & subtracting up to the number 8

c) Ravens are smart enough that, when they can't access the food they want, they will create crude tools, like using sticks to pry open trash cans or Styrofoam containers

d) We see ravens' intelligence when they work together with other ravens

Texts: 1 Kings 17:1-6; Lk 12:22-26

(Consider the birds: Raven) 4

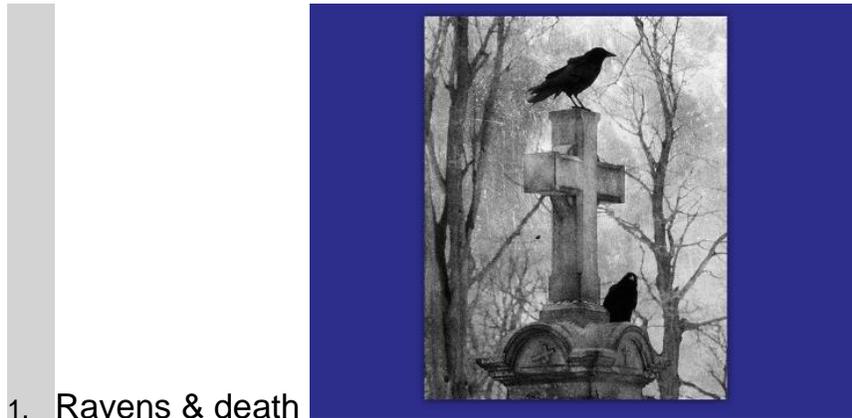
against a common enemy (E.g. 2 ravens will often tag team against a wolf or a hawk feeding on a carcass ... one will divebomb or distract their mark while the other sneaks in from behind to grab some meat)

e) Perhaps the most interesting evidence for the smarts of ravens is their playfulness: They love to play

(1) They will swoop and do aerial loop-de-loops, or even fly upside down for short distances to impress a potential mate

(2) Ravens will play a game of dropping a stick & then swooping down to grab it before another raven can get it

C. Some of the ways that ravens have been viewed historically also derive from Jewish and Christian history. In particular, the raven in the Bible has been associated with 2 things – death ... & failure



1. Ravens & death

- a) For millennia, across numerous cultures, ravens have often represented destruction, doom & annihilation
- b) In Proverbs 30:17 they pluck out the eyes of people who disrespect their parents ... Uuuh!
- c) Isaiah chapter 34 shows a vision of God’s judgment against a wicked foreign nation, making that place a landscape of rotting corpses & thorns, haunted by ravens & screech owls, jackals & hyenas

2. Raven is also associated with failure

- a) This rises especially from the story of Noah & the ark in *Gen. 8:6-9*
 - (1) Did you know that the first bird mentioned by name in the Bible is the raven?
 - (2) Remember that after the great flood, Noah wanted to see how much the waters had receded, so he 1st sent out a raven, but the raven did not return.
 - (3) Only later did Noah send out a dove, and on its 2nd expedition it returned with the olive branch, showing the exposure of land

Texts: 1 Kings 17:1-6; Lk 12:22-26

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b) So the presumption by many Jewish & Christian Bible scholars is that the raven failed in the mission Noah sent it on

c) There is an ancient Jewish commentary saying that the raven was originally white, but its feathers were turned black as a curse for failing to return to the ark

(1) There's also a similar story in the ancient Greek mythology of the god Apollos, with the raven being turned from white to black due to some transgression it committed

(2) I find these ancient mythologies about the raven's black feathers troubling today, given America's ugly history of racial oppression

(3) Maybe such ancient stories are some of the source of our North American racist history that assigns values of beauty, purity and virtue to whiteness, but casts blackness as a symbol of evil, danger and sin ...

3. Death and failure seem to be common symbols that the raven carries with it in our minds ... like a dark cloak of futility and doom. But is it really that simple?

III. As author and pastor Debbie Blue invites us to consider, perhaps ravens have been unfairly maligned

A. The Bible does not always speak with one voice, but it often presents us with contrasts and paradoxes

1. E.g. The patriarch Jacob was a man of strong faith and forefather of a whole nation of God's people BUT he was also a manipulating and deceptive scoundrel

2. Or take the Canaanites in the book of Joshua:

a) There they appear as evil, faithless enemies ... as merely obstructions to the Israelites taking over their promised land

b) Yet later in the Gospels, Jesus actually praises a Canaanite woman, saying "How great is your faith!"

B. So too the raven appears as a mixture, a paradox in the Bible

1. As you've heard there are certainly negative images aplenty in the Bible of the raven:

a) There are the previously mentioned texts in Proverbs 30 & Isaiah 34 where the raven is a symbol of death

b) There's the Noah story in Genesis 8, where the raven seems to represent failure

Texts: 1 Kings 17:1-6; Lk 12:22-26

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c) Then in Leviticus 11 the raven appears in a long list of unclean animals that God's people are commanded NOT to eat

2. But raven references in the Bible are not all creepy or negative



a) Look at the portrayal of ravens in the Elijah story in 1 Kings 17: God uses them to sustain the prophet during a long drought

b) When ravens are known to sometimes steal food from other birds, is it possible they would have brought food to another creature, especially one as predatory as humans?

(1) I don't know ... but out in the wilderness that brook called Cherith would have been a crucial water source for the ravens too, and not just for Elijah

(2) As water became scarcer without rain, the ravens may have hung out enough with Elijah long enough there to see that he was no threat to them

(3) Could it be they even considered him like "family"?

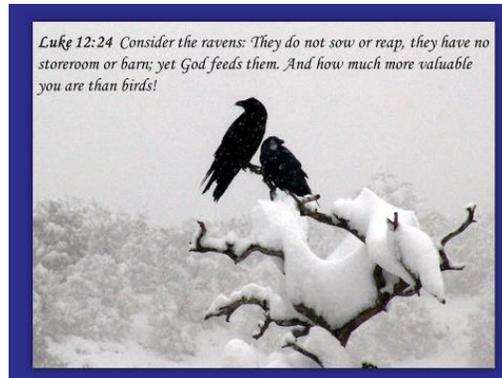
c) Instead of being a symbol of death, the raven is a life-saving bird! What's considered unclean and undesirable one place in the Bible is redeemed in another place!

3. What's more, when we come to Jesus in the New Testament, as usual, redemption is the word, even for ravens!

a) Our text from Luke 12 is part of a teaching by Jesus about anxiety

Texts: 1 Kings 17:1-6; Lk 12:22-26

(Consider the birds: Raven) 7



b) As we saw a few weeks ago with the sparrow, which was just a few verses earlier in Luke 12, this passage is almost identical in its language to one in Matthew chap. 6

(1) In Matt. 6:26, Jesus says “look at the birds of the air” rather than saying “consider the ravens”, but Jesus’ conclusion is basically the same – He says, “Yet God feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than them?”

(2) To our ears, after thousands of years of raven-bashing in our culture, the Matthew version sure seems easier to relate to, thinking about generic “birds of the air” rather than ravens

(a) It evokes images of small, lightweight song birds ... cute & colorful things ...

(b) It draws to my mind most of Mark Daniels’ bird paintings on the foyer wall ... carefree and happy-go-lucky

(3) Another reason we might gravitate more toward the Matthew version of Jesus’ teaching is because cute little birds of the air have little appetites

(a) Little birds like that just eat seeds. We love little birds – why wouldn’t God? They’re not very needy.

(b) Similarly, we like people who are not very needy ...

(i) We want to hang around those who don’t demand much from us

(ii) We prefer “low-maintenance” friends ... and peers who aren’t always asking favors of us

(4) So of course Jesus says to look at the cute little birds when he’s teaching us not to be anxious ... But ... what about the ravens?

(a) And what if YOU were a “raven”?

(b) What if YOU were “ravenous” and you consumed large quantities of stuff others found repulsive?

(c) What if your appetite was great and your reputation not so great? What if others didn’t want to be around you?

(d) Would God really provide for you then?

C. Is Jesus saying, as it kind of appears in Matt. 6, that God will only feed you as long as you're a light eater & you don't have many needs? ... That's not the God I see Jesus proclaiming.

1. So maybe that's why Luke's version says "ravens" instead of just the "birds of the air" ...

2. A lot of us are more like ravens:



a) We're sometimes greedy, often playful & needy

b) We are cleverly scavenging & figuring out how to get as much as we can for ourselves, even by deception

3. Yet Jesus says God even feeds those paradoxical ravens, with their croaking voice, all black feathers & dirty eating habits. What's gotten into God, anyway?

IV. Conclusion

A. During VBS week, Helen & Murray Bowman led the Bible response activity center.

1. In the Godly Play portion, Helen told the featured Bible stories in 3-dimensional fashion, using simple physical props like felt and small wooden buildings and people figures

2. At the end of each Godly Play time, she would invite the children to retain and ponder the story more, by asking some open-ended "I wonder" questions

B. Now I wish to end this sermon time with some "I wonder" questions of my own, drawing from the story of Elijah being fed by ravens and from Jesus' teaching about not being anxious

C. Please spend a few moments quietly pondering these questions, before we sing a song of response:

Texts: 1 Kings 17:1-6; Lk 12:22-26

(Consider the birds: Raven) 9

1. I wonder why God feeds the cute birds AND the ugly unclean ones?
2. I wonder if we dare believe that God provides for us even when our voices sound ugly, our hearts harbor dark thoughts and our voracious appetites take more than our share, leaving God's creation fouled in our wake?
3. I wonder if we could trust God enough to use "our" resources as part of God's hidden storehouses for feeding others, who are no more deserving than we are?

(During silence, play raven voice clip again for 30 seconds ... before song of response)

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