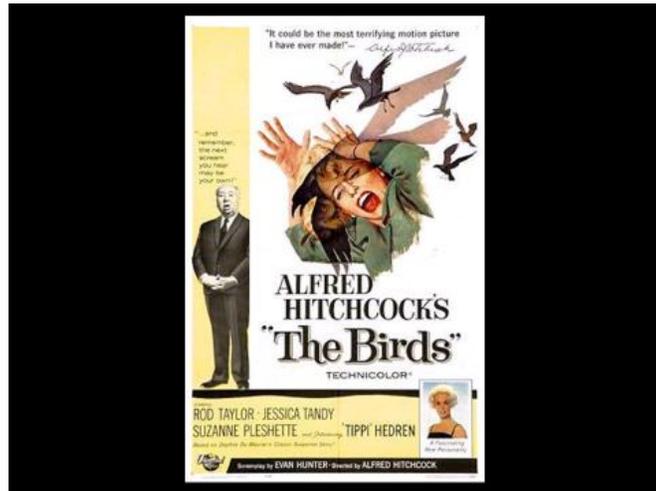


Cindy Voth  
 July 21, 2019  
 Birds of the Bible: The Ostrich – “Go Big, or Go Home”  
 Job 30:16-31; 39:13-18

I was young enough, and clearly impressionable when I viewed some of Alfred Hitchcock’s horror movie, “The Birds.” The film, which debuted in 1963, told the horrific story of sudden and violent bird attacks on people and animals. Now I need to add that I grew up in a home with really strict technology practices. We were a PBS



family with limited screen time. So how did it come to be then that we watched this movie? Well, apparently as I recall, my parents viewed this movie at some point in their growing up years and remembered it fondly, or at least not horrifically. And when I questioned why we watched it I was told that it was *so clear* that it was made up, how could it be scary?

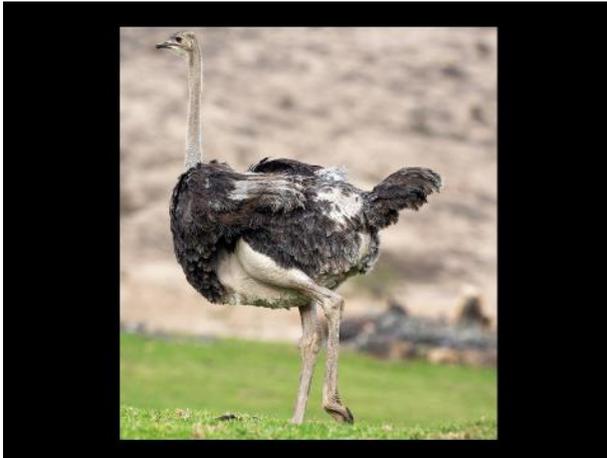
Well, this my friends was the beginning of my fear and dislike of all things birds. This fear grew in its depth after a vacation visit to Universal Studios in Florida when I was in high school. While there they had a special exhibit on the wonder and greatness of... Alfred Hitchcock, the movie maker. The exhibit included a 4D brief experience of the movie “The Birds.” So what is 4D? It means you have special glasses on so that the images from the screen appear to be flying directly at you, right in front of you. The 4D part means that there were added, special, elements such as strategically timed puffs of air to coincide with the 3D flying images of attacking birds flying for your eyeballs. Let me tell you, that at the age I was worried

about what people thought of me, but those preferences flew out the window as I ripped off those 3D glasses and hightailed it out of the exhibit hall.

Now, fast forward to the spring of 2019. I'm sitting in a worship planning retreat at Waterford Mennonite Church. And my trusted, faithful colleague Neil says, "Friends! I have a great idea for a summer worship series! I think it is timely in its message, and that our congregation will be engaged with the theme." I, always a team player, asked with enthusiasm, "Great! What would the series be about?" Neil replied with matched enthusiasm, "Birds! All kinds of birds! We would study the Birds of the Bible!" This was met by my stark stunned silence while I thought... you've got to be kidding me.

Well the conversations continued during that planning retreat. I heard of congregational members who reorient their living room furniture to better view the birds eating in their backyards. I heard of a Sunday School class going on a retreat to experience the bird migration, eager to experience thousands and thousands and thousands of birds. And all the while I'm thinking, "Wow. I would never reorient my living room furniture. Wow. That bird migration trip sounds just downright awful!" And then I remembered running last summer in South Dakota and apparently getting too close to a bird's nest so the mama bird started swooping by my head, which I tell you was quite successful in having me change course, run faster, and find a new running area for the following day. I even confess I had some of my own evil thoughts in regards to the future life of the said bird.

So here I am today, to preach about the ostrich. I figure I would just live into the familiar



motto, “Go big, or go home.” So if I needed to focus on a bird, why not choose the largest living bird? And by large I mean large. A bird that is 6 to 9 feet tall, and can weigh as much as 350 pounds! “Go big, or go home.”

Today we find the ostrich named in the book of Job chapter 30. Before we jump into

the text let’s take a step back and remember what is happening in the book of Job. If asked off the cusp, we might describe the book of Job as the story of a godly, upright man who God gave permission to Satan to torment and inflict pain for the goal of finding out if Job will keep his faith, or turn and curse God. The book then tells the story of loss and pain. The story also includes 3 of Job’s friends who first come and sit in silence with him, but then they can no longer contain themselves and they begin to offer unhelpful advice and perspectives. Their comments point to their understanding that somehow Job must be at fault as we read their repeated refrain: “those who do evil deeds will receive their just rewards.”

It is natural and common to feel sympathy for Job. We can interact with his anguish, imagine the unthinkable, and join in a shared understanding of pain, loss, and injustice. However this week I began to rethink my prior image of Job. From standing afar I am quick to feel sympathetic, and yet digging into the book I found myself experiencing some annoyance toward Job. For example, the passage Aaron read for us is part of Job’s final defense that he offers. In his own words we begin to see how great Job thinks Job is. And yes we all have to some extent

an inflated sense of ego. However, it feels like Job's ego is larger than most. I mean he thought so highly of himself that he says in verse 21 of chapter 29

“People listened to me expectantly, waiting in silence for my counsel. After I had spoken, they spoke no more; my words fell gently on their ears. They waited for me as for showers and drank in my words as the spring rain. When I smiled at them, they scarcely believed it; the light of my face was precious to them.”

Really?? “It's possible that Job overestimates his bigness, greatness, and centrality. People tend to do this. If we are central to the world, it is mostly through our own eyes. We can't really help this... but it's a little funny thinking of us all walking around this way, in separate bubbles – privately obsessed with ourselves.”<sup>1</sup>

Well Job goes on in his final defense to cry out to God and names the ways God has not been present nor responded to Job's cries. He concludes chapter 30 by declaring, “I have become a brother of jackals, a companion of ostriches.” A brother to wild dogs and to the largest living nonflying bird.

Let's pause here for just a moment to learn more about this huge bird, the ostrich. To begin with, as I already mentioned, this bird is enormous!

Six to nine feet tall, weighing as much as 350 pounds.



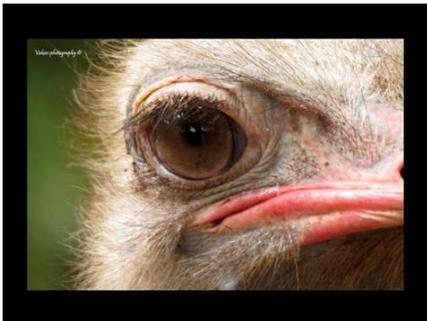
It has prehistoric-looking hooflike feet with only two toes. There is a big black claw that protrudes from one of the toes. It curls like a



fingernail of a fairy-tale witch. An ostrich has spindly legs that look like sticks until you get to the thighs, which look strangely human – like an

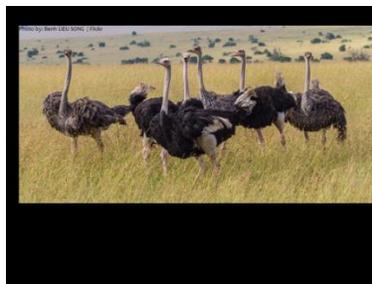


Olympic runner's. Then, bang, this whole big wide body puffs out drenched in sinuous feathers. Out of the bulging middle rises the snakelike neck that can twist and bend and swivel. Finally,



there's a tiny head with massive eyes: two inches in diameter... about the size of a billiard ball. The ostrich whistles, snorts, and grunts, as well as making a sound that's like a roar of a lion.<sup>ii</sup>

The ostrich lives in with a dominate pair that communal eggs. The female colors are lighter and blends in guards by night as his colors are darker and blends into the cover of night.



community of up to 50 birds guards the nest of the guards the nest by day as her with the sand, while the male



While it is a bird, it is actually created to run. The ostrich is faster than any other animal on 2 legs, able to reach speeds of 44 miles per hour and can sustain that speed for up to 30 minutes. Its speed allows it the ability to outrun most of its predators. In the off chance it thinks it will not be able to outrun its

predator, the ostrich lays down and aligns its head and long neck against the sand. Doing so

helps to camouflage the ostrich as it holds still and gives the appearance of a nondescript lump.<sup>iii</sup> This practice is probably where the myth arose of “You are like an ostrich and are just sticking your head in the sand.” The truth is that



ostrich as it holds still and nondescript lump.<sup>iii</sup> This where the myth arose of “You just sticking your head in the ostriches don’t stick their

heads in the sand, however they may give that illusion while they are camouflaging their bodies from predators, or while the dominate pair put their heads down into the nest in the sand to check on the eggs.

At different points in history the ostrich has reached the spotlight of fame. In the late 1800s it was all about feathers in the fancy hats for women, and ostrich feathers were extremely popular. “At one point they were worth almost as much per pound as diamonds.”<sup>iv</sup>



In the 1990s you might recall a rise in popularity of ostrich farms. I remember that we



had two such farms in my small farming community in Ohio. There were hopes that in addition to harvesting the feathers one could also sell the meat had been marketed as a red meat that was delicious and low in fat. However the industry ran into problems due to the fact that it can

cost upwards of \$75,000 for a pair of proven ostrich breeders.

Now knowing all of this, perhaps we find it confusing that Job in his lament names himself a brother to the ostrich. Given my description it sounds like ostriches are quite interesting, dynamic, valuable, and resourceful birds. And yet it appears that by naming them Job does so as a way to describe his sense of being an outcast, one forgotten, and one left to utter a mournful moaning cry, similar to that which is made by the ostrich who also seeks out desolate places.

Following Job's final defense we hear again from his unhelpful friends. Finally though turn with me to chapter 38 where here we read in verse 1, "Then the Lord spoke to Job out of the whirlwind." We learn here that God has in fact been hearing Job's cries, complaints, and questions. And so as we begin to read God's words we are prepared to finally hear some answers to Job's questions about morality, justice, and righteousness. However, that is not how God responds. Instead God responds "not by evaluating the merits of Job's case, but rather by questioning Job's knowledge of the mysteries and purposes of God.... (God's) speeches are characterized by a barrage of rhetorical questions designed to fully disclose Job's inadequate understanding of God's governance of the world."<sup>v</sup> "Job and his friends want to focus their

attention on the meaning of individual suffering... but God invites Job to see himself and his anxieties within the matrix of a wonderfully made yet finally unfathomable creation.”<sup>vi</sup>

God arrives, and speaking from the whirlwind, immediately changes the subject. God addresses the vastness of creation from the sea to birds to beasts to thunder. In chapter 39 verse 13 God even draws Job’s attention back to the ostrich. There we read God’s words,

The wings of the ostrich flap joyfully, though they cannot compare with the wings and feathers of the stork. She lays her eggs on the ground and lets them warm in the sand, unmindful that a foot may crush them, that some wild animal may trample them. She treats her young harshly, as if they were not hers; she cares not that her labor was in vain, for God did not endow her with wisdom or give her a share of good sense. Yet when she spreads her feathers to run, she laughs at horse and rider.

As author Debbie Blue notes,

The effect of God’s speeches is humbling. Job laments that he has become like a companion of ostriches. In God’s speech, the ostrich comes across as a bit of a fool, flapping its wings all around as if it is proud of them, even though they are useless. God does not condemn the ostrich for its foolishness or for forgetting that a foot may crush its eggs or that a wild animal may trample them. God does not even condemn it for laboring in vain. But God does note that it lacks self-discernment. It is not very wise. It seems plausible to suggest that Job has similarly been lacking in self-discernment.<sup>vii</sup>

Debbie Blue goes on to offer an extremely insightful observation to God’s arrival in the book of Job. She writes this:

When God comes in and takes the focus off Job and Job’s tragedy, it could seem as though God is being unkind or inconsiderate. Like the humans were claiming more importance for themselves than what was really warranted and God is frustrated by this, maybe a little punitive and snarky. But maybe it is more of a graceful move – a great gift. Maybe God is saying, “Look, stop focusing on yourself, look around for a minute – look at it all. It’s all so beautiful and mysterious and complex – and bigger than you, way bigger than you... Maybe it is not meant to diminish us in some scornful way, but rather to diminish us in a way that sets us free. (Maybe) God is trying to give us a break – consider what is not you, what is beyond you.”<sup>viii</sup>

On one hand then, we might see God's response as not caring however I believe we can also see it as a true act of caring. In God's speech we are reminded that there is a God who created this world and everything magnificent thing in it... and we my friends are not that God. God's speech reminds us that there is so much that we as humans cannot possibly fathom or understand, including many mysteries about God and God's creation. And yet, in the midst of Job's pain and questioning God showed up. While Job was asking hard questions, underneath those questions was a deep and profound need to know that God had not abandoned him. That God was still God, and that God was still present. And God arrived in the whirlwind and reminded Job in passionate and vivid ways that God is still God and God is with him.

God's speeches worked to shift Job's perspective, and ours, about life circumstances, creation, God, and even about the ostrich. The largest bird that does not fly that makes a mournful cry in desolate lands, is also a bird created to run faster than any other 2 legged animal and to possess the ability to joyously flap its mighty wings. Furthermore we most note that "The ostrich is truly a rarity, as most gigantic flightless birds didn't survive the advent of humans... (The ostrich) is huge, it is flightless, and it is not extinct. It survives in Africa, an enormous continent with fierce predators, lions and jackals and hyenas and people. And not only predators but enormous herds of competitors for food. It lives in large open spaces with no place to hide."<sup>ix</sup>

Now I confess that I am not ready to run out and find an ostrich to pet or befriend, and clearly none will *ever* live on my property. However the inclusion of the ostrich in the story of Job does challenge me to consider the ways in which I allow myself to become the center of my world. And the ostrich does challenge me to consider the ways my ego grows as well as my self-confidence that I clearly know and understand how things work in my life, in others' lives, and in this world.

This huge flightless bird now reminds me that there are mysteries that I will never fully grasp. Mysteries about my own life, mysteries about human suffering, mysteries about the intricate details of God's bountiful creation, including the mysteries of a flightless 350 pound bird. And so now this ostrich brings me peace. Not the kind of peace that I want to get near to one, but peace as the ostrich reminds me that it's okay, that I cannot nor will not ever grasp all of these mysteries. The ostrich reminds me that there is an amazing God who does understand, who does care, and who remains close to God's beloved, mysterious creation. Remains close to even me. And close to you.

In the mysteries and tragedies of life may we rest in knowing that we worship and serve a mighty God who understands the mysteries and holds them and us, including the ostrich, in God's loving arms.

May it be so.

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<sup>i</sup> Debbie Blue, *Consider the Birds: A Provocative Guide to Birds of the Bible* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN), 109.

<sup>ii</sup> Blue, *Consider the Birds*, 107-108.

<sup>iii</sup> Blue, *Consider the Birds*, 120.

<sup>iv</sup> Blue, *Consider the Birds*, 112-113.

<sup>v</sup> Walter Bouzard, "Commentary on Job 38:1-11,"

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2492](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2492)

<sup>vi</sup> Fred Gaiser, "Commentary on Job 38:1-11,"

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1301](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1301)

<sup>vii</sup> Blue, *Consider the Birds*, 110-111.

<sup>viii</sup> Blue, *Consider the Birds*, 123-124.

<sup>ix</sup> Blue, *Consider the Birds*, 117-118.