

All Creatures Great and Small

Psalm 104 [Excerpts]

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First Christian Church

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Bless the Lord, O my soul.

O Lord my God, you are very great.

You are clothed with honor and majesty,
wrapped in light as with a garment.

You stretch out the heavens like a tent,
you set the beams of your chambers on the waters,
you make the clouds your chariot,
you ride on the wings of the wind,
you make the winds your messengers,
fire and flame your ministers.

You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
they flow between the hills,
giving drink to every wild animal;
the wild asses quench their thirst.

By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;
they sing among the branches.

From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to use,
to bring forth food from the earth,
and wine to gladden the human heart,
oil to make the face shine,
and bread to strengthen the human heart.

The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.

In them the birds build their nests;
the stork has its home in the fir trees.

The high mountains are for the wild goats;
the rocks are a refuge for the donkeys.

You have made the moon to mark the seasons;
the sun knows its time for setting.

You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.

The young lions roar for their prey,
seeking their food from God.

When the sun rises, they withdraw
and lie down in their dens.

O Lord, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great.
There go the ships,
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

These all look to you
to give them their food in due season;
when you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.
When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.

May the glory of the Lord endure for ever...
Bless the Lord, O my soul.
Praise the Lord!

NOTE: THE MOVIE CLIPS THAT ARE REFERENCED CAN BE FOUND ON YOU TUBE

In Biblical religion, animals have a very special place. According to Genesis 1, on the sixth day of Creation, God said:

‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.’ And it was so. God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. *And God saw that it was good...*

Right after creating all those terrestrial animals, God created us, humankind. Biblical religion affirms that we human beings, though made in the image of God, are also part of the animal kingdom, and that we have been given special responsibility as stewards of that kingdom. Before the 613 laws which included the

Ten Commandments were given to Moses and the Israelites, there was an understanding that human beings everywhere had been given a universal set of seven laws called the Noahide laws, or “the laws of Noah.” One of those seven was, “You shall not eat the meat of a living animal,” which basically meant that you could humanely kill and eat the meat of an animal for your own sustenance, but you could not torture that animal or willfully cause it to suffer. In the Ten Commandments, # 4, about obeying the Sabbath, notably includes farm animals as those beings entitled to a weekly day of rest:

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, *your livestock*, or the alien resident in your towns [Exodus 20.8-10].

In Biblical religion, the animals over whom humans had dominion—domesticated farm animals—were as entitled to a day of rest as the King of Israel himself.

As Yuval Noah Harari noted in his book Sapiens: A Short History of Humankind (which is my personal 2017 Book of the Year):

Around the time that Homo sapiens was elevated to divine status by humanist religions, farm animals stopped being viewed as living creatures that could feel pain and distress, and instead came to be treated as machines.¹

The Bible—and the best farmers and ranchers and hunters—*never* forget that farm animals are living creatures who can feel pain and distress. Those same animals can apparently also feel something very much like joy:

¹ Harari, Yuval Noah. Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind (p. 341-342). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

YouTube clip 1: DANCING COWS

Renee introduced me to that video, and I love it: cows jumping up and down in delight after being liberated from the barn in which they had been held during the long, cold winter and suddenly finding themselves on sweet, green grass again. As our scripture says, in a glorious Psalm of praise to God, “You cause the grass to grow for the cattle...” and for that blessing, the cattle rejoice.

In the summer of 1975, I took a day trip to Virginia Beach and saw something I had never seen before. It was a bright and sunny day, and all up and down the beach, children and families were enjoying themselves—tossing Frisbees, building sand castles, applying baby oil so they could grill themselves to darker shades of carcinoma [we weren’t very smart about sunburn back then]. What was different that day at the beach—what I had never seen before—was that no one was in the water. No one was body surfing or bobbing in the waves or floating on rubber rafts. And a lot of people on the sand had binoculars trained on the water. I had never seen that behavior before in all the years I had been going to Virginia Beach, but I knew exactly why everybody was staying out of the water. It was because 1975 was the summer that the movie *Jaws* came out. *Jaws*, you may remember, was a terrifying movie about a great white shark terrorizing vacationers at a seaside resort. It was directed by Steven Spielberg—his first big hit—and based on a novel by Peter Benchley. I don’t know if there has been a movie in the last 50 years that so radically, if temporarily, changed human behavior the way that movie did. It literally drove Americans out of the water, and drove revenues at beach resorts way down. I had never really thought about sharks before I saw that movie; I’d never had a reason to. After I saw it, I hated sharks. I’d never seen one in real life, but I hated them anyway. That summer,

someone asked me, “If you could remove three species from the earth, what would they be?” I said, “Rats, ticks and great white sharks.” I had personal reasons to detest rats and ticks; the animus against great white sharks was strictly the result of a movie. Other people felt the same way. As a result of that movie, thousands of novice shark hunters went out into the oceans to get them before they got us. In the last decade of his life, Peter Benchley, the author of *Jaws*, became an outspoken advocate on behalf of the beast he had cast as a villain. “The shark in an undated *Jaws* would not be a villain,” Benchley said. “It would have to be written as the victim, for worldwide sharks are much more the oppressed than the oppressor.”

In 2003, a study showed that overall shark populations had declined 50% in the previous 15 years in the western North Atlantic. The population of great white sharks had declined 75%. When I read that, I first thought, “Good riddance. Let’s exterminate the brutes. And after we get rid of them, let’s go kill off the other species I don’t like. Let’s go fix what God got wrong in creating them.”

Except the Biblical perspective is that God didn’t get them wrong in creating them. They were created, and evolved, for God’s purposes, not ours. From 1990-2006, there were 16 deaths in the United States from shark attacks—an average one person per year. Of course, for the victim and their loved ones, that’s one too many. In contrast, humans may kill as many as 100,000,000 sharks every year.

Bill Gates, through his charitable foundation, listed some statistics on the deadliest animals. Mosquitoes are the biggest killers: they spread diseases like malaria and Zika that killed around 750,000 people in 2016. The second deadliest animal was us. We killed 475,000 of our fellow human beings last year. The next big killer was snakes, which killed around 50,000 people last year. Next on the

list was “man’s best friend”—dogs. They killed around 25,000 people, in most cases because of rabies. Tsetse flies, assassin bugs and freshwater snails killed around 10,000 through the diseases they spread. Tapeworms took 2000 lives. Crocodiles took around 1000. Hippopotamuses, 500. Lions, 100. Elephants, 100. Wolves, 10. Sharks, 10.²

Of course, the ones that catch our attention are the ones by the big critters, not the bugs, snakes and household pets. Why do those happen? One reason is encroachment—we’re taking over more and more of their terrain. Another is habituation—the more they get to know us the less they fear us. That may be the reason that the tiger Montecore in Siegfried and Roy’s magic act nearly killed Roy during a show in Las Vegas in 2003. Familiarity breeds contempt. Another reason for the increase in Human-Animal Conflicts (HAC) may be climate change, which can force changes in migratory and mating patterns. Some of the elephant attacks seem to have been revenge killings. The old maxim may be true: “Elephants don’t forget.” That may also be the reason for an increase in chimpanzee attacks on humans in Congo and Namibia. Go watch the movie, “War for the Planet of the Apes,” and tell me you don’t wind up rooting for the apes.

Wild animals have reasons to be aggrieved. As Yuval Noah Hariri notes, Today, the earth’s continents are home to billions of Sapiens. If you took all these people and put them on a large set of scales, their combined mass would be about 300 million tons. If you then took all our domesticated farmyard animals – cows, pigs, sheep and chickens – and placed them on an even larger set of scales, their mass would amount to about 700 million tons. In contrast, the combined mass of all surviving large wild animals –

² https://www.gatesnotes.com/Health/Most-Lethal-Animal-Mosquito-Week?WT.mc_id=MosquitoWeek2014_SharkWeek_tw&WT.tsrc=Twitter

from porcupines and penguins to elephants and whales – is less than 100 million tons.³

Our movie this week is “The Life of Pi,” about a young Indian boy, very religious, who finds himself stranded on a lifeboat in the Pacific with a ferocious tiger named “Richard Parker.” They wound up on that boat together because Pi’s family owned a small zoo back in India. The family was transporting the animals to America when a violent storm sank the cargo ship they were on, drowning all the people and animals except for Pi, Richard Parker the tiger, a zebra with a broken leg, a mother orangutan and a vicious hyena. The vicious hyena attacked and killed the orangutan and the zebra before the tiger killed the hyena. That left the boy and the tiger alone in the middle of the ocean. Most of the time, the boy stayed on a raft attached by a rope to the boat. He survived by eating emergency rations and catching fish to feed the tiger. It was, needless to say, a precarious situation, but with the passage of time, the boy and the tiger began to make accommodations with each other.

YouTube clip 1: “PI AND FLYING FISH”

The boy didn’t want to be on the boat with the tiger, but neither did the tiger want to be on the boat with the boy. They were thrown together. In one sense, we’re all thrown together. We share this planet with other creatures made by God. In Psalm 104, even the creatures acknowledge, in their own way, the sovereignty of God:

The young lions roar for their prey,
seeking their food from God.

³ Ibid, p. 350

In the Creation accounts of Genesis, everything God created was good. Not only that, but everything else God created preceded us on earth. The job of the first humans was to tend the Garden and to name the animals. All living creatures, including tigers, ate green plants for food. But when the first humans disobeyed God and were cast out of the Garden, they weren't the only ones who suffered. All Creation suffered as well. Despite the Great Estrangement, despite human sin, the earth is still beautiful in so many ways, and God has given us the wherewithal to know that it is beautiful, even when it's dangerous. Here's another scene from our movie:

YouTube clip 3: "PI, LIT UP SEA AND WHALE"

The earth is still beautiful. But that does not mean we cannot uglify it. Even though God gave humans dominion over Creation, it was so that we might be stewards of God's good gifts. When we dwell upon the earth, we are guests of God. For God is not only our God; God is also the God of the earth and the seas and the skies and the plants and the animals, too. God provided springs so the wild donkeys could quench their thirst, and habitations for the birds to sing among the branches. God gave grass for the cattle to feed upon, and food and wine and oil to gladden human hearts and make their faces shine (yes, oil, in all its manifestations, is part of God's Creation). Upon the earth, upon the sea, all the living creatures made by God receive their sustenance from him, and when God's breath is withdrawn, they die. "O Lord, how manifold are your works! In your wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures."

You know, it's natural to have more fellow feeling for sentient beings who relate to us than we do for those who don't, which why we can love dogs, cats and horses. It's also natural to be grateful for those animals that feed and clothe

us, like cattle, pigs, sheep, chickens and honeybees. It's also natural to fear animals that could harm us, like rattlesnakes—see Genesis 3. But God created those things, too, along with other animals we find repulsive. I just read an article that the slime of slugs is being used to make a new form of stretchy medical adhesive, which can be used in lieu of stitches in delicate heart and lung surgery. Maggots are used to clean out putrescent flesh. Leeches are used in anti-coagulant drugs. Even termites are being studied for their ability to turn wood into fuel—one termite can turn one page of a magazine into two liters of hydrogen. God is smarter than us.

In the 1950's in Borneo, there was a horrific outbreak of malaria, so the World Health Organization employed DDT to destroy the mosquito populations. That was a good thing, because it ended the malaria outbreaks. But shortly afterwards, the thatch roofs of the houses the people lived in started collapsing. The DDT had not only killed the mosquitoes, it also killed a type of wasp that ate the caterpillars that ate the thatch on the roofs. When the wasps died, the caterpillar population exploded and the roofs started to fall in. Geckos—the little lizards—ate the dead and dying wasps, and in doing so they ingested the DDT, and they started dying. Then the cats started eating the dead and dying geckos, and the cats started dying, too. Then the rat population, which had been kept in check by the cats, exploded, as did the flea population on the rats, which spread plague and typhus. The solution was to parachute 14,000 new cats into the villages to eat the rats. Everything is connected. If for no other reason than our own self-interest, we would be wise to protect God's good earth and be discerning about the creatures that dwell upon it, even the ones we don't like. We do not live outside the cycle of nature.

There are two kinds of evil upon this earth, moral and natural. Moral evil is murder and theft and cruelty of any kind. Natural evil consists of things like tornadoes and cancer, and also the cruelty that animals, especially carnivores, display to other animals. Nature truly is “red in tooth and claw.” But yet, as Christians, we are taught to hope that someday, at the end of days, Jesus Christ will return in glory. When that occurs, not only will humanity be redeemed, but all of Creation. The Prophet Isaiah foretold it:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

It might look something like this:

YouTube clip 4, “PI AND RICHARD PARKER”

And God saw that it was good...

Amen.