



Roanoke, Virginia
Picnic Sunday, June 6, 2021

“Outside”

Proverbs 6:6-11, 30:24-33

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When I was a boy, I spent hours at my parents' bedroom window. I was mesmerized by the two beehives my father had placed between the house and garage. I watched the forager bees leaving or returning from their mission sorties, going into the wide world to collect the needed pollen. I would watch the Temperature Controller bees lined up across the entrance, fanning their wings to cool the hive. I tried to imagine what was going on inside. What were those builders, guards, nurses, drones, undertakers, and Queen up to?

Children are capable of giving that kind of sustained attention to critters. I remember my daughter Paige spending the better part of an hour watching a ladybug crawl over her hands and arms. I see Emory giving undivided attention to anything she finds crawling on the ground.

There was a day before screens, books, and other diversions that most adults behaved like those children. There wasn't the same degree of separation we have now between our lives and other life; between us and the elements. The fascination came of curiosity and entertainment, and also of necessity and survival. As a result, any adult would immediately understand illustrations, metaphors, parables, or proverbs that drew on the natural world.

The book of Proverbs is full of examples where knowledge of nature is assumed and thus used as good source material for teaching a lesson or two. Consider these examples from chapters 6 and 30 of Proverbs. And listen not only for lessons being taught, but also for the Word of God.

Proverbs 6:6-11



- ⁶ Go to the ant, you lazybones;
 consider its ways, and be wise.
⁷ Without having any chief
 or officer or ruler,
⁸ it prepares its food in summer,
 and gathers its sustenance in harvest.
⁹ How long will you lie there, O lazybones?
 When will you rise from your sleep?
¹⁰ A little sleep, a little slumber,
 a little folding of the hands to rest,
¹¹ and poverty will come upon you like a robber,
 and want, like an armed warrior.

Proverbs 30:24-33

- ²⁴ Four things on earth are small,
 yet they are exceedingly wise:
²⁵ the ants are a people without strength,
 yet they provide their food in the summer;
²⁶ the badgers are a people without power,
 yet they make their homes in the rocks;
²⁷ the locusts have no king,
 yet all of them march in rank;
²⁸ the lizard can be grasped in the hand,
 yet it is found in kings' palaces.
²⁹ Three things are stately in their stride;
 four are stately in their gait:
³⁰ the lion, which is mightiest among wild animals
 and does not turn back before any;
³¹ the strutting rooster, the he-goat,
 and a king striding before his people.
³² If you have been foolish, exalting yourself,
 or if you have been devising evil,
 put your hand on your mouth.
³³ For as pressing milk produces curds,
 and pressing the nose produces blood,
 so pressing anger produces strife.

"The lizard can be grasped in the hand but can be found in kings' palaces." Don't they build palaces to keep critters like *lizards* out?

On Tuesday, I had lunch with Katherine Walker. We talked about how the separation between houses and nature is not so clearly defined when the house is built in or next to the woods. She told me about uninvited guests in her house which is *next* to woods, and I told her about uninvited guests to Whinrig, my parents' home *in* Montreat which is in the woods.

Once, my father was on his back deck reading a book when a black bear decided to join him there. The bear climbed right up on the porch with him, probably going after hummingbird



feeders. Dad slipped inside and then came back scaring the bear away by opening and closing his umbrella.

I didn't see *that* happen, but I did see *this* happen at Montreat: It was early morning and Ed McLeod and I were staying at Whinrig for a continuing education event. We happened to come upstairs from the basement at the same time. I was in search of a cup of coffee. It turns out *I didn't need coffee* to wake up. When I came into the den, I saw curled up beside one of the French windows a snake that was at least five feet long.

That was the bad news. The **worst** news was that the snake was *not* poisonous. That means I didn't have an excuse to call for Animal Control or some Navy Seal Team or Swat Team to come get it out. Among the male buddies my age, there's a guy code that says that we need to take care of things like this ourselves... which we did by one of us opening the door and the other gently urging it outside with a broom. I then casually told my mother that we took care of it, when I really felt like asking her for a hug.

We build houses to keep animals out.

We build churches to keep them out as well. Just this past week, Mark Wigginton, Ben Brannan, and Brady Anderson chased a bat out of church. It was flying up and down the halls.

The church I served in Jackson, Mississippi had a tower that looked like a beehive. Bees *thought so, too*, and moved in. When I began my ministry there, thousands of bees lived in the tower and despite efforts to plug holes, both honey and dying bees would drop down into the chancel area underneath. Because it was the chancel area, the congregation didn't have to worry about dripping honey and dying bees, but the preacher sure did. While I preached, I had to be aware not only of the congregation around me on three sides but also of bees that might suddenly drop *on* me.

At that Tuesday lunch, after telling Katherine about the snake in my parents' den, I went on to tell her what happened once in the church my friend David Dickerson once served (some of you remember David for when he served as our Parish Associate for Visitation).

Years ago, David was in the middle of preaching a sermon from the pulpit of Bethesda Presbyterian Church, one of the oldest churches in Virginia. You could plug and paint, but centuries of settling opens cracks, holes, and crevices. The church is located in Rockbridge County on an absolutely beautiful spot on a wooded hill overlooking a turn in the river. It's the kind of place one would want to build a house or a church... and also the kind of place where animals like to hang.

David was preaching away when he happened to glance over at the organist to his left. Normally, she looked at him because she enjoyed his sermons. This time, though, she was *not* looking at him. She was absolutely still, staring at the back wall to her immediate right. David then saw what commanded her undivided attention. An incredibly long snake had slithered through a hole in the wall. If the snake was as long inside the wall as it was outside the wall, it was a doozy. It was calmly suspended, studying the organist's face just a few feet away. Like I said, she was frozen in place.

David could see it was a harmless black snake. He stopped his sermon and said to the congregation, "I know that we Presbyterians don't engage in some worship practices you'll find in



other churches in these parts, but I think that right now *we need some snake handlers.*" He pointed to the snake. This was a rural church, and several teenage boys who spent most of their waking hours outdoors were more than happy to help. Several grabbed the snake and pulled hard. It was remarkable how much the snake could pull back. The boys won the tug-of-war, though, and recessed down the aisle holding the snake high with the congregation cheering.

Nobody remembers the sermon, but everyone remembers being in church that Sunday.
The snake was not supposed to be in that church,
the bees were not supposed to be in Briarwood's tower,
and the bat was not supposed to be flying down Second Presbyterian's hallways.

I wonder if the animal kingdom has the same opinion about us right now. We're not completely in their space, sitting as we are under a roof. However, we are surrounded not by stained glass windows but by views of the habitat of things that crawl, slither, swim, and fly. Perhaps this is a chance for us to have something of an ecumenical experience of species diversity as we consider whose world this is.

The Wisdom writers of scripture would encourage it.

In scripture, one might say that there is an *inside* tradition an *outside* tradition. The Torah Tradition is located inside:

- inside a book,
- inside a Temple with its Holy of Holies,
- inside an ark where there is contained the Ten commandments,
- inside a tradition of scripture and worship practices passed down from one generation to another.

The Wisdom Writings are just as comfortable outside. Wisdom writers saw creation—they saw the world and its creatures—almost to be a second Torah, a second source of God's truth. Having already studied the scriptures and received the tradition, they looked with eyes of faith to nature and experience for wisdom as to how to live as God's people in this amazing world.

The verses I read from Proverbs offer wonderful examples. As you know, the classic uninvited guests to picnics are ants. Imagine the writer of our verses from Proverbs 6 being the uninvited guest to *their* goings-on. He would be uninvited because he would be like Emory, with his head right over the ants trying to do their work. He didn't have a microscope, fish tank, or one of those ant farms with a colony somehow squeezed between two sheets of clear plastic to study. He would be on his knees watching as ants march in single file, one by one, "hurrah, hurrah." He would put obstacles in their path to see what they would do and then watch how they were willing to change direction but *not* their destination as they go around the obstacles to get to their goal. He would note how an ant can carry something several times its weight. He notes how during the warmer months they store the food they forage so they will have something to eat when they hibernate during the colder months. He sees how ants, each so small, accomplish mighty things together.



Later the writer looks around his village and sees how some laze around when there is work to be done. They expect others to do for them what they should do for themselves, or at least wait until others *tell* them to do what they should already know to do. “[Hey, lazybones!](#)” You heard it; he’s a name-caller. “[Lazybones, look at the ant and study its ways. Ants work while you sleep. In February, they’ll be enjoying a feast underground while you beg for food above ground.](#)”

The writer of the Proverbs of chapter 30 had a different audience in mind than those “Lazybones.” He first has in mind those who might not seem impressive, who might not have much to their name, but who work hard. He encourages them:

- Look at [ants](#). They are small but look how much they can pull off.
- Look at [badgers](#). They are not strong, but they are tough and live in rocks.
- Look at [locusts](#). They have no king but watch how they work together for both protection and production.
- And the writer gives that shout out to [lizards](#) that can somehow get to places others can’t, like inside kings’ palaces.

The writer saw then what we see today—that it is easy to focus on limitations and excuses. These small animals live big, and often because they *live big together*. We could imagine the writer as a “Self Help” promotional speaker, saying,

- “Find your inner ant and be proactive,
- Find your inner badger and be resilient,
- Find your inner locust and work together,
- Find your inner lizard and don’t be afraid of exploring this big world of ours.”

Then the writer turns his focus to another audience. Instead of those who might think too little of themselves and need encouragement, he speaks to those who think too much of themselves and need humility... those who think they, like the lion, are mightiest of all. “[I tell you who also thinks that way. The rooster who struts around like he's a lion in order to impress the hens. You see how silly the rooster looks because you know that it easily and quickly can be a fox's dinner or the meat in someone's soup. Even kings who think too highly of themselves can look that silly.](#)”

He doesn’t come right out and say all that, but in speaking of strutting roosters and strutting kings in the same breath, he makes his point.

There are hundreds of proverbs like these. The writers, already shaped by worship and study of scripture, have given long, sustained, and loving attention to the world around them expecting to learn more about being a creature in God’s creation. The fields, woods, and pond around this open-air pavilion would be for them books in a library of a different sort.

They remind us that, like Adam, all humankind is not meant to live alone. Though we build our own houses and churches, we are part of a larger habitat that is God’s world. Seeing how other



living things make a place within the world teaches us how to find our rightful place in it... if we only will be humble enough to learn.

I imagine that the beginning wisdom of such an informed life would know that to live well is to live in harmony with what else needs the same air to breathe, water to drink, and land on which to live. We would learn to be grateful for what sustains us, and to care for what is needed to sustain those to come. We would accept limits to life, but then explore opportunities within those limits. We would see the need to be good neighbors even to other species.

In fact, we might even get to that place to which other Wisdom writers arrived, the psalmists. They had this sense that

in finding our proper place within creation,
which includes its care,
we join with congregants of nature
like mountains,
flowing streams,
blooming flowers,
and singing birds
in giving praise to God.

