

SERMON TITLE: "God's Message through Animals: The Eagle" (First in series)
SERMON TEXT: Psalm 103:1-12
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 3, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

I'm starting a new sermon series today. Throughout this month of July, I'm going to explore with you some biblical passages that feature animals. I got this idea from a book loaned to me by Karen Miller. The novel tells the story of a stray cat sent by God to help a pastor and his congregation work their way through some spiritual struggles and grow in their faith. For some reason, the people were willing to learn faith lessons through a cat that they hadn't been able to learn in other ways.

The book got me to thinking that there are some other animals that have helped people grow in their faith—and some of those stories are found right in the Bible itself. So, over the next several weeks, we're going to let those biblical animals speak to us. We're going to see what messages God wants to tell us through some fish, a flock of sheep, and a donkey. Since this is the Fourth of July weekend, when we celebrate our nation's independence, I thought we should start with the eagle featured in Psalm 103. If we soar over this text with an eagle eye, what message is God communicating to us?

1—OUR YOUTH IS RENEWED LIKE THE EAGLE'S BY PRAISING GOD

For our purposes today, the focal point of Psalm 103 is verse five. We're told that the Lord satisfies us with good as long as we live *so that our youth is renewed like the eagle's*. For all of us who are growing older, that sounds great, doesn't it? Who among us wouldn't benefit from a bit more youthful energy and vitality? Who wouldn't like a renewal of strength and health? Just like humans, eagles grow older and eventually die. But the image of an eagle soaring in the sky looks so powerful and graceful that eagles have long been a symbol of strength for nations, as well as individuals. No doubt we'd all enjoy a good dose of this eagle youthfulness.

With that goal of eagle vitality established, then, the question is how do we get this renewal of youthful energy? In the 1990s, when I lived in northeastern Colorado, I visited an elk ranch. The

ranchers sold the elk antlers to people in Asia who believed that the ground-up horns had some kind of aphrodisiac power that would enhance and renew lagging abilities. But I don't think *that* kind of animal renewal is quite what Psalm 103 has in mind.

What I see first of all in this chapter is the renewing and reinvigorating power of praising God. Psalm 103 begins in verse one with "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless God's holy name!" Because long ago I learned these words to a tune, I have a hard time reading them without breaking into song. And, most of the time when we're singing, that's a pretty happy place.

Truly, there isn't anything better for lifting our spirits and improving our lives than putting our minds in the positive stratosphere of God's heavenly realm. If we want to soar on eagles' wings, then it's most helpful to get our minds out of the dirt and ruts. As human beings, we never can totally ignore the messy realities of this world. But if that's all we ever think about, we'll be miserable, and that negative perspective will wear us down. The worry and stress will weaken us and cause us to die before our time. However, if we can, instead, have a regular practice of lifting our eyes to the hills from whence our help comes, life will be a lot more pleasant and healthy. If we can connect with God's goodness, then we give our bodies a reprieve and our spirits a rest that does us a world of good.

That's why, long ago, God commanded the Hebrew people to practice a day of rest and worship. Sure, there was a lot of work that needed to be done. Many problems needed to be solved. But none of that would go very well if the people were exhausted physically and emotionally. In order to have the strength to get things done, they needed regular times of rest and restoration. They needed to be spiritually renewed by lifting their hearts and voices to God in prayerful adoration. We sing, "Bless the Lord, O my soul . . . Bless God's holy name!" because we gain life through regular participation in worship. We renew our youth like the eagle's by praising God.

2—OUR YOUTH IS RENEWED LIKE THE EAGLE'S BY RECEIVING GOD'S MERCY

A second way that we renew our youth like the eagle's is by receiving God's mercy. Psalm 103 is chock full of the language of God's forgiveness. In fact, when verse two instructs us not to forget all

God's benefits, the main benefit described is that God forgives all our iniquity and crowns us with steadfast love and mercy.

In verse eight, we read that "the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." The Psalmist goes on in verses nine and ten to state, "[The Lord] will not always accuse, nor will [God] keep his anger forever. [God] does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities." In verse 11, we are told that, "as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is God's steadfast love toward those who fear him." Then in verse 12, we read that, "as far as the east is from the west, . . . [God] removes our transgressions from us."

Throughout this passage of scripture, God's compassion is extolled, essentially, as the wind beneath our wings. If we're being lifted up on eagle's wings, it's because God cares for us through wonderful, uplifting mercy. If we're being renewed, it's because God's forgiveness sets us free from sin and offers us the fresh start of a second chance.

That doesn't mean we'll never struggle with sin again, and it doesn't mean we'll never again doubt ourselves or God. As long as we live in this mortal life, of course we'll feel let down sometimes and get knocked back down to earth on occasion. We all know that eagles survive by killing fish and other animals. Just because we see them soaring in the bright sky, doesn't mean they don't have a dark side. And just because we see them flying independently in the sky doesn't mean that they don't have responsibilities back at the nest. But, I think the point in Psalm 103 is that God created the eagle to rise up from the struggles and burdens to a flight pattern that is confident and serene. And I believe that's possible for us too, as we are born again—and again and again—through the transformation of God's amazing grace. Our youth is restored like the eagle's by receiving God's steadfast love and mercy.

3—OUR YOUTH IS RENEWED LIKE THE EAGLE'S BY GAINING A HEAVENLY VIEW

If we were to stop right here, we'd already have received a good message through the eagle. But, if we read farther into this psalm, we see there's a third way that our youth can be restored like the eagle's: *by gaining a heavenly view*. You might assume that's obvious in what I've already said. If we're

spending our time *praising God* and *receiving God's mercy*, how could we have our focus on anything else? Well, hopefully, that's true.

But I want to share some background that I discovered when I looked up Psalm 103 in a Bible commentary. Because of the way the 150 psalms are organized, Bible scholars know that Psalm 103 was written after Jerusalem was conquered by Babylon in 587 BCE. Bible scholars know this because the earlier Psalms reveal the Jewish people's belief that their nation, their capital city, and their monarchy had all been established by God. For centuries and generations, the Hebrew people had assumed that God would keep them strong through those human institutions.

But when Babylon sacked Jerusalem and hauled off their Jewish leaders into exile, the Jewish monarchy and independence came to a screeching halt. Those violent and horrific events threw the Jewish people into a huge spiritual crisis. How could God have permitted this destruction? How could God have allowed his chosen people to be taken captive into a foreign land? How could God have abandoned and humiliated them like that? How could God have broken the covenant promises of privilege that they believed were intended to protect them forever?

Maybe you can understand what a huge problem that was for their faith. So the Psalms that were written later had to deal with those questions. Psalm 103 is in a section of the Jewish hymnal that tries to help the people see that God is bigger than any human leader or institution. It wasn't the king on the throne in Jerusalem who was the savior, who would protect and renew them. In fact, Psalm 103:15 indicates that everything mortal is fleeting like the grass and flowers of the field.

If we want to renew our youth like the eagle's, says Psalm 103, then we need to get a 36,000-foot or higher, heavenly view. Yes, sometimes in life we must use our eagle eye to zero in on the tiny details. Microscopic elements and biological factors definitely have power to improve our lives. But we also need to know the bigger picture about God. If we had read all the way to the end of Psalm 103, we would have seen in verse 19, "The Lord has established his throne in the *heavens*, and [*God's*] *kingdom* rules over *all* . . . Bless the Lord, *all* his works, in *all* places of his dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul."

Psalm 103 ends with the very same blessing of praise that it started with. But the point is clear that God is not just the divinity of one people or one nation. No matter how special they are, no matter how chosen, privileged, and powerful they have felt—no matter how sacred and unique their relationship with God has been, should have been, or could be—God doesn't live in one temple or on one capitol hill. God's power and purposes are not tied to one ruler or one political party. According to Psalm 103, God didn't intend to be associated with or limited by Jewish nationalism, Christian nationalism, or any other kind of nationalism. If we humans could get up high on the wings of an eagle, where we could gain a heavenly view, we'd humbly realize that God's divine nature and God's purposes are so much bigger and involve so much more than any of us could ever imagine.

Every human being on earth belongs to some nation or tribe, and it's natural that we'd have some allegiance to our own land, customs, and governance. It's good that we take pride and celebrate our national heritage and strengths. But it's also important that we honestly acknowledge our national sins, make concerted efforts to repair our mistakes, and join God in caring for the well-being of all the nations and peoples of the earth. Our youth will be renewed like the eagle's when we gain this much more elevated perspective.

CONCLUSION

The eagle is a majestic animal that freely soars through the sky like it hasn't a care in the world. May we hear through it God's message to us to renew our youth by praising God, by receiving mercy, and by gaining the heavenly view.