

# Today

Nov/Dec 2023

refresh, refocus, renew

*God with Us*



ALSO: BIRDS OF THE AIR

Friends:

For many of us, birds are just birds, creatures we often take for granted as part of the landscape of daily life. But birds are beautiful creatures in themselves, and they are an important part of the world God has made. Throughout the Bible we see a variety of birds, and some of these play important roles or serve as images for God's plan of redemption for his people and for all creation.



In November, Pastor Julia Prins Vanderveen takes us through many Bible passages focusing on birds. In the wilderness, quails provide sustenance for God's Old Testament people. In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit through a dove communicates an important truth about Jesus. For casual observers of birds or for serious birdwatchers, this month's devotions provide a unique perspective on God's love for us and for the world he has made.

In December, Pastor Joe Huizenga introduces us to some of the people in his church and community on Chicago's South Side. Through eye-opening stories of people struggling with difficult and painful circumstances, we can see how God's Spirit is at work in places that are often avoided and forgotten corners of our world. These stories also give us an opportunity to see God's love in Jesus Christ lived out in neighborhoods and communities that are connected to us all.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Kurt Selles

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**“Birds of the Air”**  
**Julia Prins Vanderveen**



**“God with Us”**  
**Joe Huizenga**

**Managing Editor:** Jeff Bulthuis  
**Executive Editor:** Kurt Selles

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# november

## Birds of the Air

**Julia Prins Vanderveen**

Jesus said, "Look at the birds of the air. They do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" (Matthew 6:26).

In addition to many other things in creation such as rocks, trees, water, and flowers of the field, Jesus points our attention to birds so that we can reflect on and understand more about God's love and care for us. God has made birds a beautiful part of his creation. They also serve as symbols and illustrations in his great story of redemption, reminding us of God's presence and the peace that he brings. In his grace, God speaks to us through his marvelous creation so that we can more fully enter into his promises.

*Julia Prins Vanderveen lives and works in Vancouver, British Columbia, with her husband, Trevor, and their three sons, Gideon, Levi, and Philip. Julia has served as a copastor with Trevor in Vancouver, and she is now working at a Christian school there as a campus pastor and as a part-time English teacher.*

## GOD'S LOVING, CREATIVE PRESENCE

*The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.*

—Genesis 1:2

Have you ever watched a seagull or a tern that seems to just hang in the air over the waves? The wind may be blustering and the waters roaring, but the bird still soars calmly over the rough ocean.

That image of hovering over turbulent waters is how the Bible first describes the Spirit of God. The word for “hovering” indicates a high degree of care, even concern, in its action, and it is unmistakably linked to the behavior of protective birds that brood over their nests, guarding and keeping their clutch warm and safe as it develops. The Holy Spirit, in his protective love, hovers over the surface of the unformed deep.

The story of creation in Genesis was given to God's people at a time when other stories about the beginning of the world were filled with

themes of violence and chaos. Into that unsettled situation, the Genesis story came as a gift that revealed God's purposeful, loving intention to make all things good and beautiful. At the time, it would have sounded far different from the other creation stories. And because love and goodness are at the center of this story, it continues to invite people to know God as the loving, protective Creator that he is. As we'll see this month, many other passages in the Bible also teach us something about God through the imagery of birds. Let's keep reading and pondering together.

Loving God, help us to be continually aware of how you hover over us, keeping watch as you protect us and sustain your creation day by day. Amen.

## LEARNING TO PAY ATTENTION

*God said, “. . . Let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky.”*  
—Genesis 1:20

For anyone who has grown up under the wide-open skies of a prairie, where the horizons are far and wide and the ground is soft, it can be quite a shock to move to the city. The concrete, high-rises, and constant bustle can be disorienting. That was my experience a couple of decades ago when I moved to Vancouver, British Columbia. Though Vancouver is a beautiful city, it wasn't familiar or welcoming to me at first. I often walked with a downward gaze, wondering how to connect with a place that didn't feel like home.

Then one day the phrase “Look at the birds” entered my mind, and that was an unusual idea for me. From my perspective, birds were okay, but I didn't know how to identify many of them. Yet I suddenly remembered that Jesus had said, “Look at the birds”—and

I took it as a holy invitation to lift my eyes up. As I began paying attention, I saw that birds of all kinds were everywhere, in every season—even in the city! It shifted my perspective dramatically.

Perhaps you feel far from home, or as if you don't belong in the place where you are now. Could God be inviting you to lift up your eyes so that you can take note of his work around you and his provisions in life? Will you join me in being filled with wonder as we reflect on birds as an important part of his creation?

Loving God, help us to lift up our eyes. May we notice your marvelous creation, in which you have even placed birds in the sky as a daily reminder of your care. Amen.

## BRINGING PEACE

*When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth.*  
—Genesis 8:11

Maybe you have seen a picture or a logo showing a dove with an olive branch in its beak. That image draws from our reading for today. Over time, the image of a dove bringing a part of an olive tree has become a symbol for peace.

When we look a little closer at today's passage, it becomes clear that Noah wasn't just passively waiting for good, peaceful news. He first sent out a raven, a robust bird that flew "back and forth" but apparently did not come back into the ark—probably because it found plenty of carrion to eat. Noah then sent out a gentle dove—a more vulnerable bird—to go looking for signs of new growth. And then he waited attentively.

The dove soon returned because it "could find nowhere to perch." So Noah brought

it back into the ark for seven days. Then, when he sent the dove out again, it returned in the evening with an olive leaf. This meant the flood waters had receded to a safe level where the people and animals could flourish and thrive again, enjoying shalom (peace) in God's world.

As we reflect on this, let's consider ways in which we might participate in bringing peace in God's world. Do we just say we want peace, or are we intentionally working toward it, even in small, possibly vulnerable ways? Are we also sharing the good news of Jesus, who brings peace and rest for people's weary hearts?

Lord, help us to be bringers of peace in this world, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

## SUBMITTING TO GOD'S PROMISES

*The LORD said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon."*

—Genesis 15:9

Recently in one of my high-school classes, students became quite engaged in discussing what it means to *submit*. They argued that it wasn't appealing and that it might cause people to agree to things that could be harmful for them. In their view, submission is potentially dangerous. In a way, they're right. Submitting is risky.

Today's story about Abram believing God's word and submitting to God's promise is complex, and it has many cultural layers that can be hard for us to grasp. For example, we don't make promises today by dividing animals and then walking through the pieces. In those days that meant, "If I break my promise, may the same be done to me."

Notice, however, that Abram doesn't walk through the divided animals, as would

have been the custom. Instead, Abram goes into a deep sleep, and *God* passes through the pieces. The emphasis here is on God making and keeping the promise. Abram's task will be to believe God's promise and to live according to it.

Believing that God will keep his promises challenges us to submit and invite him to take control in our lives. And, rather than reducing our power, as some people are fearful of, this way of living brings us to live fully in the strength of *God's* faithfulness and power.

Promise-keeping God,  
your plans for us are way  
beyond what we can imagine  
for ourselves. Help  
us to trust in you always.  
Through Jesus, Amen.

## RECEIVING GOD'S ABUNDANCE

*That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning. . . thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor.*  
—Exodus 16:13-14

Do you remember the shortages that people faced during the COVID-19 pandemic? In some areas, it seemed there was no yeast or bread to be found. Supply chains were interrupted, and it was difficult for many people to find some basic things that they needed.

The Israelites faced a scarcity of food in the desert, and they complained bitterly to Moses and Aaron. But there was a problem with the people's perspective. They didn't trust God, who had shown his great power by freeing them from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12-14). Their cravings, and their confused memories, left them short-sighted and unhappy—and they began to say they were better off in Egypt!

Nevertheless, God provided for them by giving them meat every evening and "bread from

heaven" every morning. That very evening, "quail came and covered the camp," and the people ate heartily. And in the morning they found flakes on the ground that they could eat and make into bread. They called it *manna*. But it wasn't long before the people were grumbling and complaining again.

How humbling it can be to realize that we often do the same: we get focused on something that we think we need in order to be happy, and we overlook the goodness that God is already pouring into our lives each day.

Lord, forgive us for letting our cravings get the best of us. Help us to be content, knowing that every good gift we receive is from you. Amen.

## LIVING WITH INTENTION

*"These are the birds you are to regard as unclean and not eat because they are unclean. . . ."*  
—Leviticus 11:13

Every culture has its list of food preferences. Most of us tend to elevate certain foods over others, depending on what's familiar to us, what agrees with us, and what we like and don't like.

In Old Testament Israel, however, living according to food laws was not a matter of preference. The law stated that certain birds and other animals were unclean. So, as a way to live holy lives, the people were required to avoid those animals and not eat them. The food laws seemed to honor principles about life and death, suggesting that God was putting in place a way for his people to flourish.

When Jesus Christ brought about the new covenant, the old food laws were no longer required. In Acts 10, for example, we read of Peter having a vision in which God tells him

that "all kinds of four-footed animals, including reptiles and birds," were now considered clean! In this way God urged his people to spread the good news of Jesus to all other nations. People of other nations regularly ate those kinds of animals, and God did not want his people thinking that other peoples were unclean or unworthy of being saved through Jesus.

Today we are still called to be holy (set apart), living with intention as God's people. Rather than following rules about food, we are invited to live for our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, by loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Lord, please give us the wisdom to live intentionally for you. Amen.

## CARING FOR THE VULNERABLE

*If you come across a bird's nest beside the road, either in a tree or on the ground, and the mother is sitting on the young or on the eggs, do not take the mother with the young.*

—Deuteronomy 22:6

While walking near a lake one day, our family discovered a camouflaged nest of eggs that a killdeer, a small shorebird, had laid in the ground. It was breathtakingly beautiful, but it was also unprotected and exposed among the rocks.

Among the many Old Testament guidelines for holy living, some instructions in Deuteronomy told God's people what to do if they found such a nest. At that time it was considered okay to take the eggs or the young hatchlings, but it was not acceptable to harm the bird that laid them. That was a simple principle of conservation: if the eggs are taken, the bird can lay more eggs, but if the mother bird is taken or destroyed, she can't produce any more. In times of hunger, it might have been tempting to take both the bird and the eggs, but the prevailing

wisdom cautioned people to use restraint, even if they were desperate.

These instructions aren't only about conservation, though. We can trust that if God cares for birds, he cares far more about us, whom he made in his image. Jesus made this clear when he said to his followers, "Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows" (Matthew 10:31). He was explaining God's care for them when they were threatened by enemies. Similarly, God cares for you, body and soul, when you feel exposed and in danger.

Lord, thank you for protecting us when we are weak. Help us also to protect those that are vulnerable. Amen.

**BEING CARRIED ALOFT**

*He shielded him and cared for him . . . like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them aloft.* —Deuteronomy 32:10-11

Not long ago, I realized that I hadn't been invited to something that I would have liked to have participated in. It was surprising to feel excluded and forgotten. I wondered why I had been left out, but I was too embarrassed to ask, so I assumed there must have been a reason for it. In that weak moment, it was hard not to draw the conclusion that I had been excluded on purpose.

At times when we might feel insecure or unwanted, it is natural to feel hurt and alone. Feelings of isolation can create an ache in our hearts and a tiredness in our bones. We yearn for friendship and understanding. Ironically, when we feel that way, it can be hard to connect with others even if they do reach out to us—because we've begun to feel out of touch and unwanted.

Humanly speaking, there might not be anyone who can truly care for us in the way that we need to be cared for. Our hurts can sometimes be too deep for words to express. What we need is to be held and carried up over our troubled situations.

Our Lord and Savior is the only one who can truly do that. God sees us, knows what we need, and comes to save us. He scoops us up and carries us when we are not capable of flying ourselves.

Lord Jesus, we can't thank you enough for your care for us. When we feel hurt and alone, it is the greatest comfort to know that you guard us as the apple of your eye. We love you and pray in your name. Amen.

**BEING FED IN UNLIKELY WAYS**

*"You will drink from the brook, and I have directed the ravens to supply you with food there."*  
—1 Kings 17:4

There are so many radio stations where I live that the possibilities for listening to all kinds of songs can seem endless. For a time, though, one song seemed to be aired far more often than others—or at least I paid more attention to it than to others. It was meant to be a love song, not necessarily a worship song, but whenever I heard it, it felt like God's Spirit was whispering: "Come and spend time with me. Let me shower you with love for a while." This happened during a time when I was busy and tired, and the Spirit's nudging in my heart to linger in his presence was a tender reminder that he wouldn't leave me to flounder.

Sometimes God meets us in ways that are unexpected—and maybe even unconventional. When Elijah was alone in the wilderness, God cared

for him in a way that was considered taboo or impossible at that time. Ravens were unclean birds, so receiving food directly from their mouths would have seemed strange for Elijah. He might have wondered if it was even okay to receive help from something that was considered off limits. But God can potentially use anything to bring restoration, whether it's ravens or songs on a radio.

Lord, we are amazed that nothing is too hard for you and that you will come to reach us wherever we are. Thank you for doing what it takes to restore us to you. We live by grace in the power of your name. Amen.

## COMING TO TAKE REFUGE

*"May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."*

—Ruth 2:12

Sometimes God goes out of his way to care for us, and sometimes we need to go out of our way to be cared for. It's not always easy to ask for what we need, especially when others might have reasons to be cautious about helping us.

But Ruth is a bold person. She knows what she and her mother-in-law need, and she asks for permission to glean barley in a field that belongs to Boaz, a landowner from Bethlehem.

Now, Boaz is a relative of Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi, and he has heard about Ruth but hasn't met her before. And rather than being dismissive or indifferent, Boaz welcomes Ruth and invites her to keep following along after the harvesters. What's more, he blesses her for supporting her mother-in-law and indicates that Ruth is an honorable woman.

"May you be richly rewarded by the LORD," he says, ". . . under whose wings you have come to take refuge." This statement reflects the caring, providing nature of God's character, and it helps us to understand God's love for us.

God faithfully cares for and provides for us, and often he does this through the kindness and generosity of others. And whether we need help or we are able to help someone else, we can be assured that God empowers and celebrates both the one who asks and the one who gives.

Lord God, help us to trust in you, knowing that we can seek refuge in your name and that you have blessed us to share with and help others. Amen.

## LEARNING FROM ANIMALS AND BIRDS

*"Ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky,  
and they will tell you. . . ."*  
—Job 12:7

Many children around the world have enjoyed learning from birds: Big Bird (from *Sesame Street*) and Mother Goose (with her nursery rhymes) are two of the most famous bird-teachers to have flapped or waddled on the face of the earth!

One of my elderly professors often referred to birds as his teachers. When he started bird-watching, he said, he referred to small birds as "LBJs" (short for "Little-Brown-Jobs") because he couldn't tell all the sparrows and swallows apart. But the more he paid attention, the more he began to appreciate their differences. Eventually, he said, his learning to pay attention to small birds led him also to appreciate the people around him and the unique ways God was at work in their lives.

Job was discouraged that his friends were making generalizations about how God works in the world—treating everything like an "LBJ." They were spouting off ideas that had the appearance of wisdom but had no deep insight into how God could be present in times of deep suffering. Job explained that wisdom isn't about having the right answers; it's about being able to notice what God is doing in every circumstance, and seeing how God ultimately controls the outcome of our lives. Even the animals and birds know that much, he said!

Lord Jesus, give us humility and help us to pay close attention to the people in our lives so that we can recognize your merciful presence and amazing work in and among us all. Amen.

## MARVELING AT GOD'S DESIGN

*"The wings of the ostrich flap joyfully, though they cannot compare with the wings and feathers of the stork." —Job 39:13*

Some years ago, I took a bus to a small village a few hours outside of Nairobi, Kenya. Partway through the trip, as I was looking out the window, I saw an ostrich running wildly alongside the bus. Its long neck and bulging eyes stuck out in front of its oddly large body, and it flapped its enormous, fluffy wings while its skinny legs pumped furiously, kicking up clouds of dust as it scurried across the savanna. I couldn't keep from laughing! What a strange and hilarious creature!

But as outlandish as ostriches are, they still have their place in creation. Although God didn't endow them with wisdom or good sense, he did see fit to make it possible for them to outpace horses and riders—and even transit buses on African highways! Perhaps God created such a funny creature for times when things that happen

in life are just so strange that we have to shake our heads and say, "You can't make this stuff up!" Our lives are often so complex in ways that we can't explain, and sometimes we are left speechless.

Still, even strange and inexplicable things have their place in life. And like the wildly joyful ostrich, somehow everything fits together, in God's wisdom.

Lord, thank you for your wonderfully diverse creation. We praise you that there's a place for everyone in this good creation and that all things hold together in Jesus Christ. In your name we pray. Amen.

## LIVING AS ONES WHO ARE KNOWN

*"I know every bird on the mountains. . . ."*

—Psalm 50:11

One day, as we were hiking a mountain trail, my son and I heard a bird song that was unlike anything we had heard before. We stopped and looked at each other in amazement, listening to the bird repeat its long, intricate song over and over. I know a few birds by their songs, but there are still many that I don't know yet. Some people, though, can identify hundreds of birds by their sounds.

In this psalm God says, "I know every bird on the mountains. . . ." To consider that God knows *every* bird isn't just to say that God is the most advanced birder there is. It means that nothing in all of this world escapes God's attention. There is no creature, animal or human, that is outside of his field of vision, no song he hasn't heard, no call or cry he doesn't

recognize, no flight pattern or footprint he can't identify.

Not only does nothing escape God's attention, but nothing can fool him either. The one who knows every bird urges us to be real, not false, in our relationship with him. God calls us to be sincere in worship—not just to pretend or go through the motions. We are to honor God in all we do, fulfilling our vows to the God who keeps his promises. And we know we can "call on [him] in the day of trouble," for the Lord, who knows all the birds, will always hear our cry and meet our need.

Father in heaven, it's humbling to be reminded that you know us so well. Help us to trust that you always hear us and care for us. Amen.

## TO BE AT REST

*I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest."*  
—Psalm 55:6

Have you ever had the desire to fly? Do you ever wish you could just leap up and fly away for some peace and quiet?

Sometimes in life, the troubles we face can cause deep inner turmoil. We may struggle with our mental health, a physical disability or disease, a relationship that feels stuck, a difficult career, a deep disappointment or loss, a cycle of poverty, or something else. Many different things can make us feel trapped.

When David wrote this psalm, he was feeling disillusioned and stuck. He was distraught by the situation he was in, and he felt betrayed by a friend. He desperately wanted a way out and dreamed of being like a dove so he could fly far away from all his troubles.

But as he wrestled with his discouragement, he grew to un-

derstand that although he did not have wings to fly away, he did have a voice to call upon God. The solution to being released from life's burdens isn't to escape but to give them up to the Lord: "Cast your cares on the Lord, and he will sustain you."

Echoing the assurance of this psalm, Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. . . . Learn from me . . . and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-29).

Lord and God, thank you that even when we are surrounded by troubles that we would rather escape, you give us the wings of prayer and you promise to sustain us. Help us to cast our burdens on you. Amen.

## SETTLING NEAR GOD'S HEART

*Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young—a place near your altar, LORD Almighty, my King and my God. —Psalm 84:3*

Several years ago, a building contractor who was working on a new site next to our church asked if we were aware of the birds that were flying in and out of the attic of our church building. We had to admit that we hadn't noticed!

The songwriter of Psalm 84 saw a bird that had built her nest in the Lord's temple, and the writer reasoned that this was the best place to make oneself at home. God's hospitality extends to all that he has made, and for people who love the Lord there is no better place to be.

This psalm is a song of deep yearning for spiritual connection with God in a place of worship. The joy of worshipping God gives strength for people who travel. Even when they are far away from God's house, even in a dry place like the val-

ley of Baka, God's presence goes with them. Wherever they may go, they can find the sweetness of God's presence in worship, so they are able to go from strength to strength.

Jesus echoed this teaching when he met a woman at a well in Samaria; he taught her that the place of worship is wherever God is. And when she discovered that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, she went to tell everyone in her town, and they came out to meet with him (John 4)!

Better is one day with you, Lord, than a thousand elsewhere. Thank you for welcoming us into your presence wherever we go. Amen.

## UNDER HIS WINGS

*He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.*

—Psalm 91:4

Psalm 91 shows that God, “the Almighty,” is not intimidating or frightening. Instead, God is so gentle and concerned for everyone that they can find refuge in him like hatchlings under the care of a hen.

As God’s people, we can trust the Lord fully because he will surround us, guard us against dangerous threats, and deliver us.

Resting in the shadow of God’s protective wings means that we don’t need to be afraid of chaotic things happening around us. There is a time for us to walk courageously into situations with God’s help, and there is a time to retreat and be still in his caring presence.

If you ever have the privilege of watching chicks take cover under a hen’s wings, you’ll see that they stay very still and quiet, completely out of view

of danger, while the hen is alert and watchful and will do whatever she can to protect her young.

Jesus uses similar imagery when he expresses his desire to gather up the people of Jerusalem and protect them (Luke 13:34). He is gentle and makes space for us near to his heart.

Lord, help us constantly to stay close to you so that when danger threatens, we will be safe in your care. Gather us in and hold us close. Amen.

## APPRECIATING GOD'S CREATION

*The birds of the sky nest by the waters; they sing among the branches.*  
—Psalm 104:12

When life feels chaotic and messy, it can be wonderfully therapeutic to look at creation and see how marvelously diverse and joyful God made it to be. There is order and purpose everywhere in God's good design, and the more we learn about the earth and its creatures, the more we can celebrate how amazing it is.

If you're feeling out of sorts or discouraged, try watching a nature documentary about flamingos or weaver birds, cockatoos or hummingbirds. When you do, consider that Christ was there in the beginning, overseeing everything and taking great delight in the creation of this magnificent planet (Colossians 1:15-20).

Spending time in wonder and awe as we consider God's extraordinary, well-ordered creation can help us appreciate our place in the order of things

too. This can also lead us to feeling grounded and secure rather than tossed about by the sometimes merciless systems created by humans.

Pondering the marvelous works of God—the mountains; the water cycle; the birds, animals, insects, and sea creatures; and all the forests and plants they depend upon—can also lead us to worship. Recognizing all of this splendor with gratitude to God can deepen our connections both to God and to his world, filling us with the desire to lift up our hearts in praise and adoration.

God of wonders, draw our attention to your glorious works so that we might know you better, inviting all peoples to praise and honor you. In Jesus, Amen.

## KEEPING GOOD SECRETS

*A bird in the sky may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say.*  
—Ecclesiastes 10:20

When we are surprised that someone knows a secret, we might hear them say, “A little birdie told me.” Sometimes that can be a pleasant way to share that we know something special is afoot, but that phrase can also be a way to shift responsibility for a secret that hasn’t been fairly kept.

So it is good to observe the caution in this column of wisdom from Ecclesiastes: Don’t share what’s not yours to share. The wise author of this passage knew that talking about things that should be kept discreet can lead to trouble for a person who likes to gossip—and to anxiety for the person whose private information isn’t respected. It can be nerve-wracking to consider how the sharing of private details or secret thoughts might damage one’s reputation or relationships. In-

stead, it can be far better not to repeat a person’s secrets at all.

James 3 notes that the tongue can be like a spark that sets off a forest fire. Even just a little gossip can do a lot of damage. And Jesus taught that everyone will need to give account for every careless word they have spoken (Matthew 12:36).

Let’s be careful to speak wisely and faithfully, honoring God and our neighbor in all that we say. “Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech” (1 Peter 3:10).

Lord Jesus, by the presence of your Holy Spirit, give us wisdom and discretion. Guide us to keep our tongues from causing harm to others and ourselves. Amen.

## LOVE BIRDS

*"See! The winter is past. . . . Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land."*

—Song of Songs 2:12

In some parts of the globe, winter brings cooler weather and lots of rain. In other parts, the sunlight hours grow much shorter, the air gets cold, rain turns to snow and ice, and birds fly away till spring comes again. It can feel like a long, dreary season. Even people who like winter weather are eventually glad to see signs of spring, when flowers appear again and lots of birds return from far-off places.

Blooming flowers and singing birds can stir up visions of a place and time that is inviting and flourishing. This hopeful picture in the Song of Songs touches on a universal experience: having one's heart light up with hope, especially in the presence of another person. Even the memory of a significant relationship, or the hope of having one, can spark the important feeling of wanting

to love and be loved. And experiencing such love is like the refreshing return of spring after a long winter.

We were created for intimacy and closeness with others, and although this is not perfectly realized in this lifetime, the imagery of waiting for winter to be over is a bit like longing for heaven—when we will be lovingly received by our Savior, who takes great delight in us. Meanwhile, whether or not we face a long winter ahead, we look for signs of hope.

Lord, we long for the time when all our seasons of bleakness and struggle will be past. Keep hope alive in our hearts till we can rejoice in living with you forever. Amen.

## LIKE EAGLES

*"Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles. . . ."*  
—Isaiah 40:31

In many places around the world, birds are a significant part of human culture. Just look at flags, stamps, coins, and bills from a variety of nations, and you'll see a wide array of winged creatures.

Do you know which birds are celebrated where you live? Canada loves the loon because it conveys solitude and peacefulness. China highlights the stork because it symbolizes longevity and wisdom. New Zealand favors the kiwi because of its uniqueness, and India prizes the peacock as a symbol of immortality and resurrection. Ancient Egypt famously profiled the eagle as an emblem of protection and strength, and dozens of countries, including the United States, claim the eagle as their national bird.

Eagles are truly majestic creatures that symbolize strength and independence. Catching

sight of an eagle as it soars high above the earth can be breathtaking, and watching one swoop and maneuver its immense wings is awe-inspiring.

The reference to eagles in Isaiah 40 is a comfort for God's people in a time of weariness and struggle. Our matchless Creator and Sustainer gives us his strength and glory, filling us with the capacity to do far more than we think is possible.

We may feel weak and powerless in our current circumstances, but because of who we are in Christ, we can hold on to the promise that in his strength we will "soar on wings like eagles."

Lord God, renew our strength each day so that we may reflect your glory. Amen.

## UNDERSTANDING THE APPOINTED SEASONS

*Even the stork in the sky knows her appointed seasons, and the dove, the swift and the thrush observe the time of their migration.*  
—Jeremiah 8:7

Sometimes, as much as we want to hold on to the way things are, we must face the reality that change is a part of life. Teenagers are encouraged to “leave the nest,” and “empty nesters” gradually become used to different rhythms in life as their children leave home. Still, even when it’s time for a change, we can tend to resist it.

The prophet Jeremiah refers to storks, doves, swifts, and thrushes, contrasting their wise behaviors with the foolishness of people who have turned away from the Lord. Jeremiah laments the thick-skulled attitudes of the people around him, who lack wisdom because “they have rejected the word of the LORD.” The prophet is saying, in effect, “Even the birds know what needs to be done, but these people are so stubborn!” There is a season

for everything, and it’s our task to recognize what season it is.

The invitation here is to consider what season it is for each of us. Is it time to repent? Is it time to relinquish? Is it time to restore? The apostle Paul encourages the church to “be alert and always keep on praying” for each other as a way of being ready for whatever the Spirit will lead us to do (Ephesians 6:18).

Lord, it’s easy for us to become distracted or discouraged, and we need your wisdom to know how we should live. Guide us to be alert, paying attention to the seasons in our lives, and to respond as we ought. Amen.

## SHOWING CONCERN FOR THE EARTH

*"Because of this the land dries up, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea are swept away."*  
—Hosea 4:3

Through Hosea, the Lord is bringing serious charges in our reading for today. Dangerous conditions brought about by people who care nothing for God and his creation have led to a loss of "the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea."

Sadly, there are chilling parallels in our pollution and degradation of the earth today. Reckless human action has negatively affected many plants and animals, birds and fish, and the environments they need to live in. Many kinds of pollution have harmed people as well. Wars, chemical spills, nuclear fallout, industrial contamination, and more have left devastating effects on the earth and its creatures, including us.

While some areas are seeing remarkable restoration and many efforts today are being

made to show good stewardship, there are still indications that creation is suffering immensely. Animals, birds, and fish are often pushed aside and destroyed as their habitats are altered according to human preference.

While cause and effect in the environment is complex and not always easy to explain, we can still strive to do what we can to preserve and restore God's good creation.

Lord our God, help us to be aware of the consequences of our decisions, and give us the courage to protect and maintain the earth you have entrusted to our care. Amen.

## GOD'S SPIRIT DESCENDING LIKE A DOVE

*At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.*

—Matthew 3:16

The fact that the Spirit rested on Jesus “like a dove” at the moment of his baptism is not insignificant. To understand why, we can start by asking where else in the Bible we have come across doves, and what connections we can make between these stories.

Remember how Noah sent out a dove from the ark? It first came back with nothing, and then, after going out a second time, it returned with an olive leaf in its beak (Genesis 8:11). The fresh green leaf in the dove’s mouth signified the beginning of a new era, a hopeful turning of events, the renewed presence of peace and shalom, and the imminent promise that no such dramatic devastation would have to happen again.

The reference to a dove at Jesus’ baptism is a sign that another new era has begun

in Jesus Christ. In Jesus, there is finally a hopeful turning of events: the arrival of a peaceful reign and the promise that Jesus’ coming will be pivotal in history. In this event we see a sign that God is recreating the world in Christ, setting things right, and rebuilding so that his purposes can finally be realized.

Lord Jesus, in your baptism we see the sign of God’s new promise and the unfolding of your great plan to restore the whole world to yourself. We marvel at the beauty of how everything holds together in you, and that the Scriptures point faithfully to your perfect plan. In your name we pray. Amen.

**“LOOK AT THE BIRDS”**

*“Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.”*

—Matthew 6:26

When Jesus said, “Look at the birds . . .” his listeners could probably watch these creatures as they flew among the plants and trees on the mountainside. If you can, take some time today to look at birds—even if just for a few minutes. Consider that much of what was written in the Bible took place outdoors, under the bright skies where we can see and make connections to the creation God has made.

A problem with so many of us today is that we are often disconnected from what God has made; we read the Bible indoors with our heads down, and we try to distill the truth into statements that are general and abstract. Bit by bit, we can grow out of touch and unsure about what it all means.

Our family’s children’s Bible illustrates this story with a cou-

ple of birds casually pushing a grocery cart loaded with food. Even though some birds such as nuthatches, chickadees, and woodpeckers actually keep food in little caches, the sight of these birds gathering pantry items in a cart is comical. But Jesus’ point is that birds simply do what the moment requires them to do; they don’t agonize about their lives. They simply depend on God’s care—always.

Jesus points out that just as God cares for birds, he cares much more for each one of us. And, truly, we can’t add a single moment to our lives by worrying. Best of all, God has given us everything we need in order to have eternal life!

Lord, thank you for your faithful love and care for us. In Jesus, Amen.

## DON'T BE AFRAID

*"Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them."* —Luke 12:24

Today's reading from Luke is similar to yesterday's reading from Matthew. Jesus probably taught this lesson often, perhaps even pointing to birds that were nearby at the time.

Jesus urges his listeners to recognize what is most important in life. Is it food? Clothing? Having lots of money and possessions? In many parts of the world, the expectation that people will enjoy a life of security, privacy, and comfort is almost assumed. Yet, after times of disaster, when possessions are destroyed, we'll often hear, "Those were just things that can be replaced if we really need them—we're just glad to be alive."

Jesus knows that a life attached to material things can lead to anxiety. Things are temporary, and we can't always control when or how our possessions will be taken from us. So it's

better to attach ourselves to each other and to God. Jesus encourages us to live in such a way that people and their needs have priority over possessions and ownership. So let's not be controlled by worries about possessions or food or money.

Jesus concludes by saying, "Do not be afraid, little flock." He knows that we're vulnerable, and he knows what we need. In fact, he promises that God, our Father, will give us the kingdom—much more than we need.

Lord Jesus, thank you for your tender care for us, and for guiding us in the way of wisdom. Help us to care more about each other than about our things. Amen.

## SEEKING REFUGE

*"How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing."*  
—Matthew 23:37

If you have ever watched a hen with her chicks, you might have noticed that the hen will cluck loudly when she senses danger nearby. The chicks hear her warning, and if they know what's good for them, they run to her for cover. The hen will droop and spread her wings to make room for the chicks, but if they don't respond to her invitation, they will be exposed to danger.

Two things become apparent when this imagery is used to describe God and his people: God's character is steady and protective, but human responses are sometimes unpredictable and foolish. Refuge is always available, but we need to seek and go to it as well.

How many of us suffer because we haven't run to the Father for cover? What needless pain do we bear because

we don't go to the Lord? If we are scurrying around, trying to fix things and worrying about getting attacked, why are we trying to do this on our own? Our only sure protection *in life and in death* is God our Savior.

Jesus longed to cover God's people with his protective love, but they wouldn't listen to his invitation. Even so, on the cross Jesus took the full brunt of the enemy's attack in order to save us—and through his death and resurrection we can have eternal life!

Lord Jesus, thank you for saving us so that we can live with you. Teach us to seek refuge in you and to live faithfully each day. Amen.

## LOOKING IN THE WRONG PLACES

*"Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather."*

—Luke 17:37

One time while we were on a hike as a family, we sat on a bluff overlooking a valley, and we took out a bundle of sandwiches made with leftover roast turkey. As soon as we started eating, a large vulture came swooping past us. And just as quickly it flew off again, seeing there was nothing dead or decaying for it to eat.

Jesus' comment about vultures in our reading for today has to do with questions about the end times. People often wonder whether disasters in their era are signs that the world is going to end. Today too, with wars, earthquakes, droughts, hurricanes, floods, and fires causing so much devastation and hardship, people question if these events might be the harbinger of Jesus' return. But when his disciples asked him to explain about his coming again, Jesus gave a cryptic re-

sponse about dead bodies and vultures! It seems he was simply saying that if you see many vultures gathering in the sky, you can be certain that something is dying.

In another passage Jesus adds that only the Father knows exactly when the end will come—"not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. . . . So . . . be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him" (Matthew 24:36, 44).

Knowing that Jesus will eventually come again, we can live faithfully as we continually look forward to his return.

Lord, help us not to grow weary of waiting but to continually hope in you and to live for you as we long for your coming again. Amen.

## CLAIMING TO KNOW CHRIST AS LORD

*Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." —Matthew 26:75*

While it might be easy for us to overlook sparrows and other small birds in our daily meanderings, it can be hard to ignore a rooster if we see or hear one: the gurgling, jarring, sometimes ear-splitting racket is enough to wake anybody up!

In our reading for today, the sound of a rooster crowing became a devastating wake-up call for Peter. He had promised to be faithful, but when it came right down to it, he chickened out, and he denied ever knowing Jesus. And, of course, Jesus knew that would happen. It isn't easy to identify with a suffering Savior.

Sometimes today too, the Holy Spirit may use ordinary things in our lives to help us see how we have let Jesus down. It could be on social media, or at work, or when we're driving that we are suddenly pierced with an awareness of how we

haven't done the right thing, and that we too are capable of denying our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Thankfully for us all, God is merciful. In John 21, after Jesus has died and risen again, he lovingly restores Peter, calling him to serve faithfully (John 21:15-19). Through his perfect love, Jesus also reverses our denials by reclaiming us as his own.

Lord Jesus, we are sorry for the ways we have denied you in our lives. Forgive us, restore us, and empower us to claim you as our Lord. In your name, Amen.

## TRUSTING GOD'S PLAN TO BRING JUSTICE

*I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, "Come, gather together for the great supper of God. . . ."*  
—Revelation 19:17

My first sighting of the flight of tens of thousands of crows at dusk in East Vancouver was eerie and foreboding. But over the years, I've grown used to this cacophonous, raucous parade in the sky that takes place twice a day as these birds travel between the beaches and their rookeries.

These midair birds fly higher up than songbirds but closer to the earth than soaring eagles, and they are flourishing in many cities today. They have even been dubbed the "Einstein bird" for the ways they have adjusted their behavior to human patterns. Crows have learned that threats are fewer and food is more plentiful in urban areas, so they live in abundance in protected parks, and they glean from the messes that humans leave behind.

The Bible has many references to these prolific birds that God has appointed in his plan to bring justice, and in Revelation 19 they are called to devour evil rulers. Acknowledging these swarms, or murders, of crows is chilling and unpleasant, but we also have the hopeful promise that God will not allow evil to have the final word. There are things that happen in the world that break our hearts; we recognize corruption and evil. But in Christ we are assured that one day things will be made right again.

God of justice and righteousness, we trust in your promise to make all things new. Let your kingdom come, and may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## SEATED WITH HIM ON THE THRONE

*He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"*  
—Revelation 21:5

Some imagery that appears in the beginning of the Bible is contrasted or expanded upon in the final chapters of God's grand story of salvation. The unformed abyss in Genesis 1, for example, is contrasted with the stunning architecture of the heavenly city in Revelation 21. The tree of life in the garden of Eden (Genesis 2:9; 3:22-24) is multiplied in Revelation 22 and described as constantly bearing fruit and providing healing for the nations. And the image of the Spirit hovering and brooding over the waters is contrasted with the One who is now seated on the throne.

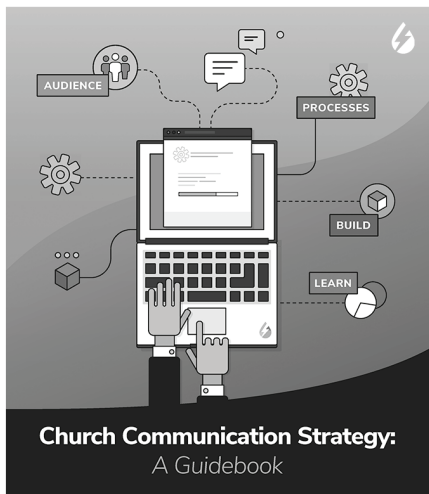
Creation will be complete, fully formed and mature, and we will enjoy glorious, delightful friendship with our loving Creator, who invites us to live with him in the perfect unity of love that has always character-

ized God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The awe-inspiring creation that we live in today will be the foundation for the new creation, and we can look forward to rejoicing along with birds and all other creatures in the new heaven and earth.

Not only is Christ seated in the heavenly realms, but we who love and trust him are also raised up with Christ and *are seated with him* even now (Ephesians 2:6). This means our lives are firmly grounded and maturing in Christ as we enjoy the intimacy of living in communion with God each day while awaiting his coming again.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, may all honor and glory be yours, now and forever! Amen.

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