

## AND THAT'S WHAT THE RAVEN SAW

I come from the Yukon, where the raven is the territorial bird. I love ravens....always have, but since being in Whitehorse I have come to appreciate them in a new way. I love them. They're smart, and they're always hungry, they're known as tricksters, they know how to think and to work together and they have attitude. You pass them on the street where they're eating something ...they just step aside and say “go ahead” - Ravens. They're great.

Today I want to invite you into a Biblical moment.

Genesis 8: 6-8

The raven flew to and fro, to and fro, it says...

the *dove* returned to the ark, to try again another day, and eventually to come back bearing our old friend the olive branch.

The raven - flew to and fro.

Try to think your way, to *feel* your way into that moment: The flood is finally over; the interminable rain has stopped, the skies are newly, gloriously blue and the raven is released from the ark. The mission? Find the new world God had promised. Find the land.

She begins to fly, ahhhh! stretching her wings – it feels so good after the cramped and clammy cabin of that vessel...and she circles the ark first, simply enjoying the long awaited sun on her back. Then - she takes off on her mission. Catching the currents, dipping, swooping, and watching for land.

Watching for land. Watching.....for ...land.

None yet...well, she thinks... it's early in the flight. She flies on....

and on.....

and after *quite* a while (because hope is persistent....) she gets a strange feeling in her black and

feathery breast....and after even longer, she knows. In her deepest self she knows....there is no land.

There is no land. The promise is....well...it hasn't come true. God had promised a new world...or hey -

DID God? Did God really promise that? Maybe that had been just their soggy imaginations. How do

you know something like that? How do you KNOW if it's God's voice or....just your own....and....

she put that aside. No time for questions like that. She kept flying, black, beady eyes scanning....and a sour question in her soul, burning, like a green apple bellyache

No land, no promise, no happy ending. Nevermore.

Well...maybe not nevermore. not yet at least, and not any time soon by the looks of it. She flies on, back and forth, back and forth. And she carries in herself the fading hope, the uncertainty about the future, the sickening, humiliating sense of having trusted too completely, believed too naively. They'd been duped. There would be no new world. Would there? And yet she flew on. There was nothing else to do. It was...it was the next right thing to do.

*You* know that moment. I know you do. You know it in your gut and in your gullet. That moment too is part of living in the rainbow's promise. The dove and the olive branch – yes. But the raven and the question – also yes. Also part of our rainbow heritage; part of the spectrum of faithful living.

Well the land did appear as you know, but Raven never forgot. You just don't forget something like that.

And from that time on, Raven made a vow: that she would hold that experience in her breast; keep it

close for the rest of us; promised to never forget what it felt like to fly over that water, wondering....not knowing....and to embody that experience in beak and feather; to sing those feelings - to squawk and caw and trill them to the world so we would never – ever – forget what it is not to know.

She would do that from high above the earth where rainbows shine  
and also, from below, low on the ground where sometimes the rainbow's glow has not yet reached...

the raven is *exactly* the bird for this moment. We are in raven time. The old world is gone.....washed away in the flood of history. What the new world will be is yet to be revealed  
and we....we're just flying back and forth, back and forth.

She promised that she'd never forget...and not let us forget either. Where we've come from. The raven side of our story. The dove – the dove gets a lot of press, in the church and out of it. The raven? Not so much. But she won't let us forget.

And so it is that you'll find the raven high up in trees or flying in the sky...  
but also down low, as low as it gets... you'll find her by the side of the road, picking at the garbage or road kill, the life that the world has thrown away, or run over and speeding by not even stopped to mourn. Right down there. Kind of like the gospel.

You'll find raven where others don't want to go. Wherever people are desperate or hungry or without hope. When Elijah was in the wilderness – who was it who brought him food? Doves? No. They might get their little pink feet dirty. Ravens.

And you know...what the gospel writers may not have recorded is that after a great big picnic one time, on a hillside, where many were fed...5000 and that's not even counting women and children and ravens... and 12 baskets were gathered up afterwards...  
when those baskets were taken away, and everyone had gone home; when the excitement and the carnival smell of miracle were no longer in the air  
the truth is that the powerful were still in charge, and poor still voiceless, babies still starving and that's when the raven came.  
After the picnic....  
the ravens, and the others came along...those who were late, didn't get the memo....too sick to have made it to the picnic, too unsure of themselves to have risked being asked to leave...  
the ravens came too  
to eat the crumbs which out of the abundance of that picnic were left, pieces not big enough to count, or to gather into the baskets.  
They came and fed on those crumbs.

The raven is exactly the bird for this moment. We're in raven time.

There she is.... raven is flying still, back and forth, back and forth, black and lovely – above the landscape where signs of hope are hard to find. After the picnic. When things are not so clear any more, no shiny olive branch to save the day  
only the persistent and growing fear  
that the flood will not recede  
that the change that's come upon the world is not promise but calamity  
that we don't know – anything - for sure

and that even the God we once knew, were so sure of, is now unknown...and we seek and we grope and sometimes we fly back empty we're in raven time.

This world is hungry. You know it is. Hungry for something real. For something Holy. For connection, For God. In a time when much is in question, when we fly to and fro, to and fro, looking for something solid...and we are hungry for the land.

In a time when there are statues everywhere to an unknown god, we are hungry to know. The God we once knew, or thought we knew, is being revealed in different ways that make us cry out in confusion – how do we know?

I have a friend who is 15 years old. Her name is not Jennifer, but let's call her that today. and although I no longer live where she lives, I keep in touch with her on FB. Jennifer now has a young man in her life, and she posted recently "I just want to be everything he needs me to be." I posted back "Ah Jenny....please. Be everything YOU need to be. For yourself. Like at CGIT remember? To become the girl God would have me be"

and she posted back

"I want to and I would but I don't know what that is. How do I know who I'm supposed to be? How do I KNOW?"

That's a good question. How do we know? What will I say to Jennifer when I get home and back on FB? I want to say Oh honey you'll just know....but maybe that's not true. Is it? How will she know who she is, who she is in her deepest truest self – she doesn't know. What will I say to her?

Partly I will say that I too have that question; that it's part of living on this side of the rainbow. Somewhere inside me, I think, ought to be some instinct, some primal urge to migrate, some ancient knowing but often I am unsure and flying back and forth a bird ought to know, I think to myself. a bird ought to fly home but sometimes I don't know where home is and sometimes there is nothing in my breast or bones that tells me it's time or not time and this I hold as a shame to myself and wonder if I am the only one.

How do YOU know? Who you are, what you are called to do, who God is and what is the meaning of your life – of life at all? How do you know?

Those of you who are here celebrating a call to paid accountable ministry: either retiring from it or just beginning – how did you know?

Someone called Dorothy Smith says that those who are at the margins; those who are disenfranchised, come closer to knowing the truth because they have to know not only their own lived truth, but also the world of the powerful, in order to survive. And this two fold knowing they say brings us closer to the truth. That seems like a raven way of doing things to me. From the top – and from the very bottom with the road kill. So...that's a clue, I think. How do we know? Like the raven, the church in the north may be on the margins in a way that even other churches are not – and this may be the time to listen with special ears to northern voices. The bright colours in OUR sky, that reveal themselves in the coldest and darkest time of year;

In the Acts reading, the people had statues. To an unknown God, they said. How will we tell them what

we know? And perhaps, more to the point, how will we tell them that in fact we do NOT know, not in any certifiable, data supported way.... that we are in raven time, and there are moments when we fly back and forth, back and forth, the ark no longer an option and no land as yet in sight? Sociologists will tell us that the time for knowing is long past; the enlightenment, Christendom and their accompanying certainties are simply things of the past. Post moderns are more aware of the ambiguities and paradox of life; of its mystery, than were previous generations. That annoying cliché “I'm not religious I'm \_\_\_\_\_” is partly witness to that. A hunger, an awareness, a reaching out...and a suspicion of those whose claims are too definite. They've learned to associate that with exclusivity and judgement. And forgive us they are right. How do we live in a time like that? What is our witness to people who are spiritual but not religious because they have learned *from us* that to be religious means to be narrow and unyielding?

Our witness has something to do with the rainbow. Whatever the promise holds it is for all creation. ALL creation. THIS we know

Our witness has something to do with bread and fish and hunger deeper than both of those things/  
With friendship ...with a kind of love that matters beyond our individual questions or uncertainties; that matters beyond whatever pain may be part of this moment ...it has something to do with the kind of love that enlarges us all....friendship and a deep unity greater than blood or species and makes us one with a whole that outlasts all its parts

with a Presence in raven time of a deep knowing in a place beyond knowing – of a comfort that sustains, and heals and gives meaning and makes the unknowing bearable.

This is our witness this is what we say and who we are to a hungry world and this is the truth that we would not trade for a grove of olive branches

every empty garbage can

every hungry winter

recalls for us that first flight, those crumbs after the picnic  
and brings us closer to the heart of the matter;

In a hungry world where people long for bread and where there are statues to unknown gods...

this is our very strength. This is what we have to give. THIS IS OUR WITNESS. What we offer and what our lives bear witness to is that there is a reality that is beyond knowing; it's not about knowing, in the end. It's not about knowing. By our brave flying back and forth we model a faithfulness that privileges silence, and humble unknowing in the way of mystics and dreamers before us.

*The most godlike knowledge of god, says the midieval Dionysius, is that which is known by unknowing.*

*...the unplumbed depth of God which has no name wrote Meister Eckhart*

To an unknown god, the people said. How do I KNOW Jennifer said?

Let's not fail them. Not the builders of statues to unknown gods; Not Jennifer, and not the raven. Let's not betray their truth nor our own, by cheap and easy olive branches plucked from some megamall of the spirit. Let's honour their flight; their questions; their temporary but deep despair. Let's invite them into a family, a community, a way of walking in this world that is deeper than knowledge and bread that is chewy with uncertainty, dark and dense with mystery.

We will not stoop to a slighter vision, nor compromise the rainbow covenant – not even for the relief of pretended certainty

we will not stoop to a slighter vision or soar to a place where the questions no longer matter  
for the violence it would do to -not only to our own nature  
but to the Light of God within us.

We will join our voices in a chorus of caws and squawks and trills  
a chorus of love for the loveless and unloveable  
a symphony for the road kill  
a feast of crumbs for the perpetually hungry

As at every other moment in history....  
The old world is gone – washed away in the flood of history  
what the new world will be is yet to be revealed

the least we can do is share our lunch.