



Ask The Beasts: Darwin And The God Of Love

With Elizabeth Johnson's book as our guide we will explore and deepen our understanding of God's love by looking to the beasts, birds, plants, and fish.

Chapter eight - Bearer of Great Promise

Steve Crain

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- Elizabeth Johnson, pg. 234

I'd like to explore themes from this deeply moving chapter by referring to four striking images in the text: telescope, volcano, bear, and sparrow. Johnson's prose is so clear and incisive by all means, immerse yourself in her arguments but I find her images lodging themselves in my heart. Perhaps this is so for you as well!

Telescope. Not in the sense of magnifying something distant, but in the sense of "stepping back" to take in the long view, a view of the whole. Or like picking up a compacted telescope and stretching it out in order to see its entire length, from beginning to end. We've been considering what the beasts say here and now about their living, their dying, and their changing. Now we consider also their ultimate beginning, and most especially, their ultimate ending. But as the Christian considers the full "length" of cosmic time from "original creation" (ultimate beginning) all the way through to "new creation" (ultimate end), it is the "middle" episode in cosmic history that pours out meaning upon the whole: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Johnson admits that talking about the end of all things (think "apocalypse"!) has an air of "unreality" about it. "But there is one God, burning fire of divine love," and "if this absolute holy Mystery can create life," and then take up flesh and flame forth in the crucified, risen Jesus, "then this same holy Mystery in faithful love can rescue [life] from final nothingness" (p. 213).

Volcano. Like many theologians, Johnson finds continual inspiration in the works and words of Karl Rahner, perhaps the brightest star in the firmament of twentieth-century Catholic theology. The volcano image is Rahner's. What is it like to walk about on this planet, in this cosmos, knowing that the resurrection of Jesus is THE foretaste of what is ultimately to come? Rahner suggests, it is like witnessing the eruption of a volcano! "His resurrection is like the first eruption of a volcano which shows that in the interior of the world, God's fire is already burning, and this will bring everything to blessed ardor in its light" (p. 227). This image invites us to "feel the heat" of divine love burning within all things, especially all living things, even **EVEN!** in their dying and decaying.

Bear. For lovers of John Muir's writing, the section entitled "Muir's Bear" might be the highlight of this chapter. Encountering a dead bear in Yosemite, Muir cried

out against Christians who claim that such magnificent creatures have no place in heaven, no eternal presence and significance. How “stingy”! Made of dust like we are, breathing air and drinking water as we do, “a bear’s days are warmed by the same sun, and his life, pulsing with a heart like ours, was poured from the same First Fountain” (quoting Johnson’s paraphrase of Muir, p. 228). Why shouldn’t God’s love be “broad enough for bears”? I invite you to hold Muir’s bear in your heart as you sit in the “glow” of Jesus’ resurrection and consider possibilities that, for you, may be as new and refreshing as they are for me. Possibilities for, somehow, a resurrection of *all* life, not simply human life.

Sparrow. “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father” (Mt. 10:29). What are the possibilities for Muir’s bears, and for all living things, including Jesus’ sparrows who fall to the ground? If the redemption that Jesus wrought is truly “cosmic” in scope as many biblical texts imply, texts that Eastern Christianity has celebrated and Western Christianity largely ignored then there is hope that *every* creature that has ever lived will somehow participate in the great climax of creation, the New Heavens and New Earth of which we get a glimpse in Jesus’ risen flesh. With joy, Johnson concludes: “In hopeful trust in God who is faithful, theology dares to affirm that the living world with all its members is being drawn toward a blessed future, promised but unknown” (p. 234).

Questions and Exercises for Further Reflection

- Do you find in your own thoughts and feelings about “salvation” and “redemption” the “asymmetry” of which Johnson speaks: the tendency to think of God as the creator of *all* beings, but the savior only of human beings? Explain. Has Johnson helped you to envision a more all encompassing salvation? How?
- Find a place where birds are congregating and settle in to meditate on them. With Jesus’ words in Mt. 10:29 echoing in your ears, let God’s love for these creatures soak into your mind, heart, and soul. Journal your response to this experience. If you are so inclined, write a poem.
- If pets have played a special role in your life, how do those experiences illuminate the message of this chapter? How does this chapter deepen your appreciation of sharing a home with pets?