

JUMPING

I'm a sucker for those Nature shows on TV. It doesn't matter to me if it's a colony of ants or a pod of whales, there's always some fascinating new thing to be learned.

That's exactly what happened to me some weeks ago when I was finally getting to watch a previously DVR'd show about grey owls. Now, I know next to nothing about owls, so this show promised to be a treasure trove of new information for me--thanks to the efforts of a single researcher who, having discovered an apparently very hard-to-find owl's nest, made it his business, for many months, to visit the site every day, no matter the time of the year, no matter what the weather.

This nest was situated high up in a tree that had been snapped off in some storm, leaving a jagged upper part of the trunk which served perfectly the purpose of owl nest-building. From a hidden vantage point down below, this nature photographer, who was utterly taken with grey owls, could observe them every day and film them just going about their natural owl-business--repairing the nest, hunting for food, and (apologies--this is the R-rated part of the sermon) mating.

Because there was a little too much of that R-rated activity, there were soon three or four eggs in the nest, and in time three or four fuzzy little chicks, who, like all kids, constantly demanded to be fed. Over time, the day-by-day photography showed, the chicks were growing at such a rate that the plump little things, by virtue of their increasing body size, were actually pushing each other to the edges of the nest. In other words, the day was fast approaching when they quite literally would outgrow their world. It would soon be too small to accommodate them, and they would have to go out on their own.

That day arrived and our intrepid naturalist was there to record the moment when each chick in turn stood perched at the edge of the nest and prepared to take its leave. It was at that point in the program that the narrator said the sentence that took my breath away and had me quickly rewinding the tape to be sure I had heard them right. Here they come. He said, "Owls need to jump before they can learn to fly."

That thought flabbergasted me. It was absolutely true. The only world that these little owls knew was the world of that two-by-two nest, high up in that tree. There were no previous practice sessions related to the emerging ability to fly, no prior opportunities to try out their inexperienced wings by clumsily fluttering from bush to bush safely close to the ground until they got it right. No, there was only the exclusive growing up very high above the ground and ultimately, without any preparation at all, the ending up poised on the lip of their woody nest, peering out on the vast world beyond it, looking, I thought, a bit uncertain and edgy at what would come next.

And then, amazingly, one by one, each of these chicks leaned forward and threw itself into the air . . . and flew. It was a clear illustration of the so-called "leap of faith," a term usually attributed to a young Danish theologian named Søren Kierkegaard. Evident in those young owls was that leap of faith. Each tossed itself into the air, confident that it would figure out this flying-thing as it plummeted to the ground. And each did.

Just as the voiceover had said, "Owls need to jump before they can learn to fly." It was one of those thunderclap moments where, if one is paying attention, what is being said at the surface means something even more profound at a deeper level. It's one of the ways by which the still-speaking God does indeed still speak to us.

What struck me so emphatically was that what was said about grey owls is actually no different with people,

that it is the same with us, tempted to huddle in our comfortable nests of the well-worn and the habitual. Any peep, owl-wise or human-wise, which nervously, anxiously remains there in the world of the known never will become all that it is designed and destined to be. Any fledgling, owl-wise or human-wise, which cautiously, fearfully stays there in a world that increasingly is too small to serve it, never will fly.

As you plainly hear, all this isn't really about the grey owl. So, I don't want you going home today and in response to the question about what was said in church this morning, you answer "owls." Because it's really about us . . . which brings us to this morning's reading from Genesis.

It is an old, old story which is told there--of the aged patriarch Abraham, promised by God to be the father of a multitude of faithful peoples; of Isaac, his only son and therefore the only means by which that multitude will ever be realized; of a God who tests the integrity of Abraham's trust by ordering him to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering.

It is, I think, a positively horrible tale. Oh, it might work as a riveting storyline for audiences dating to some two or three thousand years ago, but I dare say that, these many generations later, it is found to be frightening and repugnant, to think that God would actually test people in such capricious and cruel manners.

Is it true that God is that insecure? Is God's understanding of our hearts truly so muddled, that such extreme measures must be enacted to assure our fealty? If we are to fear and dread God, the story works quite well; if, however, we are to love and trust God, I'd say it fails pretty miserably. Consistent with what I have confessed in other sermons, I think that this is yet-another instance of the once-imagined finicky God that now we are struggling so hard to outgrow.

In any case, the point to the old story is presumably something related to Kierkegaard's stated "leap of faith." It has to do with remaining faithful to the course when all obvious and reasonable signs suggest abandoning it. It has to do with trusting God to provide and protect when all apparent evidence seems to indicate otherwise. The leap into faith is to risk jumping when everything suggests that to do so would be misguided and foolish and reckless.

Point well taken, but surely there is a better way to have illustrated it than this harrowing scenario of Abraham, in deference to God, potentially slaughtering his child and burning his body as a sacrifice. Personally, I'll take the grey owls.

If this leap is good enough for maturing owls, surely it's good enough for us, don't you think? Nature, it seems, is inclined to push us, owls and humans alike, out of our comfort zones. And Nature shows us that the leap of faith is not really about jumping to see whether or not God catches us, but jumping to discover that we can fly. Now, there's a God to trust in! Now, there's a God to live by!

And as for our philosopher Kierkegaard, let us allow him, here at the end, to speak a bit for himself: "To dare," he says, "is momentarily to lose one's footing"--which is to say, to dare is to leap. Gutsy. But, he adds, "Not to dare is to lose oneself."

So, what do you say? As individuals, as a congregation, shall we jump?

Do we dare to leave behind the familiar nest of who and how we have been?
Do we dare to fly?