

On The Wing
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Two times in my life I have seen the rosy maple moth. Both times it was a remarkable experience. The first time I was a college-kid spending summers in the mountains of western North Carolina as a camp counselor at Holston Presbytery Camp. I was the rustic ranger, so I spent my days driving a hulking Dodge back and forth on a gravel road between main camp and this less accessible area. I would haul coolers of food to the various campsites so that campers and counselors would have fresh supplies to cook over the open fire. I was on my way to the bathhouse to build the fire that would heat the water, and my eyes were drawn to the rough-hewn door frame. A bright pink and yellow moth rested there and once I noticed it, I could not look away.

The rosy maple moth looks like it comes straight out of a kids coloring book. Native to the Ozarks, the moth is found in southern Appalachians, and is a silk moth in the family of Saturniides. At times, the color can vary, showing up in more muted hues. But both times I have seen the moth, she has been a stunner. **Pink the color of plastic castles and yellow drawn from the deepest hue against a background of greens and browns of the forest.**

To whom, then, will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.
Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who created these?

No doubt, we humans like to think we came up with everything - from art to technology to building, and back again. But the rosy moth to me is proof, that God got there first. And that we are in the hands of a good and gracious Creator, a loving **and surprising** God.

If you read along the in the passage from Isaiah, the least surprising verses are the final lines of the passage. This verse is perhaps one of the most familiar in all of scripture. It is dog-eared in many a Bible. Its image cross-stitched into many a frame. The words printed on mass produced greeting cards, and its sentiment shared in prayer in many a hospital waiting room.

*But those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.*

The original audience of this text needed an encouraging word. They were the people of Judah, who had been exiled from their homeland when the Babylonian empire supplanted them. The people would have felt abandoned by God, personally bereft and communally concerned. They struggled to face the future.

The prophet Isaiah then offers these words of consolation and encouragement in their despair. Wait on the Lord, the prophet says, and you will not be weary. Wait on the Lord, the prophet says, and you shall not faint. Wait on the Lord, you will have renewed strength. Wait on the Lord, the prophet predicts, and it will be like riding on the **Wings of Eagles**.

Our familiar and expected interpretation of this passage, leads us to consider the life of faith as proximity to the Eagle, those awe-inspiring creatures. With their regal presence and majestic demeanor, eagles are often associated with militaries and empire. Known for their keen eyesight, eagles have exceptional vision, and can spot prey from great distances. Their powerful wings enable them to soar effortlessly through the sky, showcasing their agility and grace. They are excellent hunters and killers. Eagles are renowned for their strength, resilience, and unwavering determination. When we ride with wings of Eagles, we have by faith, power, freedom and access to unwavering heights.

But THAT is the expected interpretation, and we, friends, worship a surprising God. In her book, Consider the Birds, Pastor Debbie Blue says this of the witness to God in scripture: “Sometimes we don’t have great imaginations for God. We are confined and limited by stereotypes and preconceived expectations. I believe that the word of God, far from confirming everything we already think we know, can surprise us.”

She certainly does her part to shake things up when she translates the Hebrew word in this passage. The term *neshet* is most frequently translated as Eagle, but most scholars agree, at least one alternative, if not a more fitting translation is “griffon vulture.” Yes, that’s right, people of faith: Those who wait on the Lord will run and not be weary, they will walk and not faint, they will take to the skies on the wings of the VULTURE!

Gross. Vultures – really? Vultures are scavengers associated with death and decay. Their bald heads and long necks are evolutionary adaptations that help them maintain cleanliness as they feed on carcasses. Their stomachs are like steel drums so they can ingest the worst of bacteria and toxins. They urinate on their own legs. And projectile vomit on anything that startles them. They don’t fly with purpose and strength, but ride around on thermal drafts – sometimes up, sometimes down, wherever the wind will take them. Vultures eat so much dead flesh at their meals that they become too heavy to fly. They wait to digest with their tiny heads sunk into their hulking shoulders hissing and grunting because they have no song. A group of vultures is not called a flock, but, more ominously, a wake.

But before you get grossed out with your memories of the great black stringing up meat from a carcass along the road, vultures are surprising creatures too.

Blue teaches us the Vulture was and is revered in other cultures. Far from being relegated to evil and darkness, they were appreciated for staring down death and ingesting it too. After all, we need something to eat death and rid the world of its toxicity. To create space for health and life, for something new.

Did you know that in Egyptian theology, the vulture was revered as a generative creator. The vulture appears as an ancient Egyptian hieroglyph that represents the sound used in *mother and grandmother*. In Tibet, bodies were not buried or burned but laid on the rocks because it is an honor for one's body to be returned to the carrion birds. The Mayans referred to vultures as death eaters as a good, godlike thing. Their blood and feathers were extracted and used to cure disease. Most recently, in India the government created vulture hotels offering untainted meat after a pesticide used in farming killed thousands. They realized the need for these great birds who took care of rotting remains that would otherwise spread diseases. And there is the proper name for the turkey vulture. From the Greek *katharsis*, meaning "to purify" and the Latin *aureus*, meaning Golden. The great bird is then *Cathartes aura*, the "Golden Purifier." Vultures stare death in the face and they fear it – not at all. It goes through their bodies and comes out harmless. They cleanse the world.

At our recent New Member luncheon last Sunday, we had a good turnout. Folks who had already joined or were planning to do so, some new visitors just interested in learning. I offered

my PREZI slideshow, an entire presentation on all the wonderful things happening in the life of the church. Because there are many ways to be involved, many partners in God's work in the world, lots of things we do. We are alive and well, with purpose we soar!

But at the end of our time together, someone asked a question that no one knew the answer to. And it spurred one of our elders in attendance to remember the losses we've had in the congregation this year. And we have had so many, quite a few – seven deaths, three interments, four memorial services in a little over a year. And I know these people are not statistics to you, but partners, friends, family whose losses are still and forever will be felt.

Their deaths matter, of course, to you, but they matter to our community too. So, I took a beat and redirected, painting a fuller picture of the life of Covenant Presbyterian Church which includes death. We are a people who hold space for grief, who accompany you in pain, and who stare unabashedly into the face of death with words of hope, songs of resurrection, sacraments that speak of a new life in Christ.

Friends, we live in an overscheduled culture of success and productivity. You've got to know the latest and possess the newest. Congregations get caught up in this too. And we soar with the emblem of strength and dominion, the powerful and quick killer Eagle.

But what if we ride, instead, on vulture's wings? What if we don't look that great and are weirdly – if surprisingly – shaped. What if we don't rush headlong in for the kill, but drift along with the ups and downs of the Holy-Spirit filled wind? What if we walk into the valley of the shadow of death without fear? What if we ingest all the excrement of this year's election cycle and spit it back out unharmed? After all, we serve someone other than the empire. We serve a surprising God.

To God Be the Glory. Time without End. Alleluia. Amen.