

THE GOOD BOOK

PART VII: FIELDS AND MEADOWS

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Easter Sunday, April 1, 2018

Lectionary Readings: Psalm 19: 1-4, 14 and John 20: 1-15.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

April First Is Fool's Day;

It's Butterflies and Moths on the Communion Table

Today is a rare day, when both Easter and April Fool's Day coincide. The last time this happened was in 1956, 62 years ago, and the next one isn't that far away, in 2029. Considering the rarity of this coincidence, there are probably tens of thousands of sermons right now about the apparent vacuity of Paul's Gospel admonition to be fools for Christ, but I'm going to pass on that temptation.

However, our Christian Education Committee has asked me to incorporate the theme of butterflies into the Easter sermon for today. I'm happy to oblige on one condition, that it will cover both butterflies and moths. The committee undertook my plaintive request after lengthy debate and condescended to my petition upon a close vote.

On the communion table, we have the *National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Butterflies and Moths*, and we have a fantastic coffee-table book called *Biophilia: The Human Bond with Other Species* by Edward O. Wilson, with marvelous pictures. There's an old photograph of a butterfly that I'll mention later, and the television is cycling fifty-some photos of butterflies that Bernie Lewis has taken over the years. There's also what's called a pysanky, the Ukrainian Easter egg with the butterfly theme on it that my wife Tracy did. To top off the display, in the cases on the piano and also on the communion table are butterflies that were provided by the Price family. So thank you all.

Let me begin with a short poem by Robert Graves, called *Flying Crooked*:

The butterfly, the Cabbage White,
(His honest idiocy of flight)
Will never now, it is too late,
Master the art of flying
straight,

Yet has – who knows so well as I? –
A just sense of how not to fly:
 He lurches here and here by
 guess
 And God and hope and hope-
 lessness.
Even the aerobatic Swift
Has not his flying-crooked gift.

A Sphinx Moth feeds on a

Trumpet; a Beautiful Blue Morpho Saves an Ill Child

We have all been entranced by the wonder and beauty and delight of butterflies throughout our days. Perhaps we had a butterfly net as a kid and a meadow to play in, or perhaps we've been to the state fair or the Museum of Natural History and have seen the displays of serious collectors. Or maybe we've been sitting in our backyard on a sunny afternoon, and a butterfly alights upon a sleeping dog or baby or flower, demanding our attention and lightening our souls.

It need not be a sunny afternoon. One rather late August night, well after 11:00 p.m., I was sitting in my backyard, having a glass of wine and taking in the night air. I happened to be sitting next to a trumpet vine, thinking little enough, when suddenly a Sphinx moth, almost indistinguishable in size and flight from a hummingbird, began its nocturnal feeding on those beautiful flowers. The large moth hovered only a foot or so from my head as I sat still and quiet. I was transfixed by the moment — the rarity

of such an encounter; the brrrrrrrr of the wings right by my ear; the exquisiteness of this little creature of nature, dimly visible in the dark.

Some of you might have seen *The Blue Butterfly* (2004). This marvelous movie tells the true story of a terminally ill ten-year-old Canadian boy whose dream is to catch the most beautiful butterfly on earth, the mythic and elusive Blue Morpho. His mother, single and frazzled, but determined to grant this last wish of her only child, persuades a renowned entomologist (played by William Hurt) to take them on a trip to the jungles of Costa Rica to search for the butterfly, leading to an adventure that will transform their lives. I won't spoil the ending for you but will say only that you will have a tear of joy in your eye.

Another movie is the French film *Le Papillon*, in which the search for a rare Alpine butterfly leads to healing and redemption in a troubled family.

On the communion table, there's an old, somewhat faded photograph of a butterfly. In a church I served in Michigan there was an amateur nature photographer named Dan, and when it came time for Tracy and me to move away, he gave us this framed photo, which has been in my office for the last 34 years. People assume that it is a Monarch butterfly, but I don't correct them unless they ask about the photo. It is actually a much rarer butterfly, the Viceroy.

Monarchs Fly Haphazardly,

Taste Bad; Viceroy Fly Straight, Taste Just Fine

This is the story that Dan told us when he gave us the gift: He said that Monarchs fly in a haphazard fashion, much like the Cabbage White in the poem. One of the reasons they are carefree is that they have few natural enemies. It is surmised that they generally aren't eaten by normal predators because they taste bad. Not so for a Viceroy. Viceroy's taste just fine, but predators steer clear of them because they look almost identical, probably, to a Monarch.

The main difference between the two, however, is in the way they fly. Viceroy's never flutter about like Monarchs but are fast and intentional. If they are going from one flower to the next, they go in a straight line and fast. In addition, they are skittish, making them almost impossible to photograph.

Dan first noticed a Viceroy in a meadow, which is remarkable in and of itself. Watching it for some time, it was going from flower to flower, but now and then returning to one particular branch on a small bush. So he set up his tripod and camera focused on that branch. He had a 15-foot cable to trigger the camera remotely. And then he waited, nestled down in the brush 15 feet away in the meadow, keeping an eye on that branch. The moment arrived, and the photo is here. Dan's word of advice after telling

me the story: "Always go for the Viceroy in life."

Butterflies (and moths to a lesser extent) have been a classic Easter symbol going all the way back. The way the classic version of it goes is that the caterpillar stage represents our regular human life, and then the cocoon or the chrysalis stage represents our death, reminiscent even of the shroud, the linen cloths wrapped around Jesus' body. Finally, after death our soul or spirit emerges into the heavenly realm, the angelic realm, no longer encumbered by physicality, and that is the butterfly stage.

The Caterpillar Doesn't Die, It

Metamorphoses; Follows Death by Resurrection as a Butterfly

As far as metaphors or analogies go, this isn't the best of them. For one thing, it's a bit negative to liken our human experience to that of a worm. I know some people who feel that way. They are glass-half-empty people, but it strikes me as a bit harsh. However, the caterpillar doesn't really die but rather changes, called metamorphosis (a Latin word meaning to change from). In any case, really dying is an important part of the Easter message.

This reminds me of an Easter sermon I heard years ago, perhaps memorable because the preacher did not know the difference between two key words — "resurrection" and "resuscitation." So he preached an entire

sermon about Jesus being resuscitated. “Come on, Jesus, you can make it.” This definitely made the sermon unforgettable.

Despite the butterfly metamorphosis analogy having some weaknesses, the analogy is actually receiving better science that has been discovered of late. National Public Radio had a great story about this a couple years ago, centering on some research done by an entomologist named Bernd Heinrich, Professor Emeritus, University of Vermont. Quoting NPR:

“He [Heinrich] is thinking about moths and butterflies and how they radically change shape as they grow from little wormy, caterpillar creatures to airborne beauties. Why, he wondered, do these flying animals begin their lives as wingless, crawling worms? Baby ducks have wings. Baby bats have wings. Why not baby butterflies?”

“Because the radical change that occurs,” he says, “does indeed arguably involve death followed by resurrection.” And I’m quoting this person. “The adult forms of these insects are actually new organisms.”

New organisms? Heinrich continues:

“In effect, the animal is a chimera, an amalgam of two, in which the first one lives and then dies . . . and then the other one emerges.”

What he’s saying is this:

“While a butterfly appears to be one animal, with a wormy start and a fly-

ing finish, it’s actually two animals — *two in one!* We start with a baby caterpillar that lives a full life and then dies, and then dissolves. There’s a pause. Then a new animal, the butterfly, springs to life — but resurrected.

“According to this theory, we’re not sure, but perhaps long, long ago, two very different animals, one destined to be wormy, the other destined to take wing, accidentally mated, and somehow their genes learned to live side-by-side in their descendants.”

When this theory was first proposed (not by Heinrich but by an English entomologist), eminent scientists scoffed. Said Duke biologist Fred Nijhout, this idea fits better in “The National Inquirer than in the National Academy (of Sciences).” Other critics were a touch kinder. Undeterred, Heinrich pressed on with his research:

The Cocoon Phase Is a Deathlike

Intermission; The Analogy to Easter Is Better Than Thought

“So the caterpillar grows and grows until one day it spins itself a silk coverlet (a cocoon) or a harder pupa or chrysalis, a container that dangles off a twig and it goes . . . silent.”

This phase is, as Heinrich puts it, “a deathlike intermission.” He uses the word “deathlike” on purpose, because inside, these

caterpillars shrink, shed their skin, and their organs dissolve. Their insides turn to mush. Most of their cells die, but lurking in the goo are a few cells (the so-called adult or “imaginal” cells, perhaps the equivalent of human stem cells) that at this moment jump into action, reorganize all the free-floating proteins and other nutrients and turn what was once a caterpillar into a butterfly — “*what is, in effect . . . a resurrection!*” Heinrich’s words.

“What’s happened,” says Heinrich, “is that the caterpillar section of the DNA has been turned off, and the butterfly instructions have been turned on.

“There are indeed two very different sets of genetic instructions at work,” he writes, and this switch, turning “caterpillar” off, and turning “butterfly” on, means that “most of one body dies and the new life is resurrected in a new body.”

There is no controversy about the mechanics I just described; it’s the explanation that’s new and controversial. The old view was that over millions of years, animals evolved this habit of switching from one set of instructions to the other. The new view is that . . . the adult forms of these insects are actually new organisms. A caterpillar is born and dies; a butterfly is resurrected from its juices.

So the analogy to Easter is actually getting better than we had thought.

But there is still one more crazy twist to come:

Professor Marthe Weiss, another eminent entomologist, studies butterflies and moths inside her tiny laboratory on the campus of Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. She and her colleagues study moth memory. Says Professor Weiss, “The question we asked is whether a moth or a butterfly can remember something that it learned as a caterpillar.”

To find out, Weiss and her colleagues put a lot of big green tobacco hornworm caterpillars into boxes and then gave them whiffs of gas (ethyl acetate). It’s an ester, a nail-polish remover that’s rather pleasant-smelling to these bugs. If the caterpillars moved toward the pleasant smell of that ester, they were then zapped with a tiny electric shock. In Pavlovian style, the caterpillars learned to associate the smell of that gas with a shock. Go near the ethyl acetate, get a shock all day. Being smart caterpillars, after a while they didn’t go near the ethyl acetate anymore.

Next, the researchers let the caterpillars do their thing: Go into the chrysalis stage and start the process that would turn them into moths. One by one, these caterpillars disappeared into brown pupal chambers that completely dissolved their bodies and their brains. Five weeks later, the moths hatched out.

The moths avoided the smell of ethyl acetate just as the caterpillars had. Somehow, the caterpillar memories had survived the biological meltdown. Weiss and her coauthors reported on their results in the journal PLoS ONE, which is published by the Public Library of Science.

**“Behold, I Will Tell You a Mystery!
At the Last Trumpet, Death
Has Been Swallowed up on Victory”**

This might be more than you wanted to know about butterflies. But there is something sacred, something sacramental going on. This ancient symbol has a depth to it that we have not yet fully explored.

Christians celebrate the victory of life over death for Easter. The Jews are celebrating Passover. The Neopagans are celebrating the Vernal Equinox. And everyone is happy that springtime has arrived after a long winter.

I have found it to be the case, all through my life, that nature has a way of teaching and reinforcing the principles of faith, of both the

physical *and* the spiritual life. I think that is what is going on here. Nature is an extraordinary teacher of spiritual principles, a point I was trying to make when I did that sermon series on archetypes, looking at the spiritual lessons of trees, mountains, and water.

Trees teach us that we are both in the heavens and rooted in the earth, and they are both good. Mountains teach us that there are high points in our lives, which then nourish and inform our times in the plains or the valleys. Water teaches us that life is poured out upon the earth, both within us and all about us, and that it is sacred, holy. And butterflies teach us that death only appears final, but rather it is a transition from one life to another being, from Paul’s “mortal body to put on immortality.”

But today is April Fool’s Day. Oops, I mean Easter. Consider these ancient words from I Corinthians 15: 51-54, but hear them anew in light of what we are learning about butterflies:

“Behold, I will tell you a mystery!
We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’”

Happy Easter! Amen.