



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Over the past three weeks or so, I have found myself caught in one of those rabbit holes that you fall into on the internet. You begin by looking at one webpage and you hit the link and then you follow the other webpage, and then you cut and paste and put it into Google, and then you find out that there's all this other information about it, and so you follow that.

And this week I found myself at kind of the end of this particular rabbit hole. I was reading from the journal of the Marine Mammal Science. It's a peer-reviewed journal, open access, which I believe in. And it was about this incredible event that two wildlife biologists saw in Northern California. Their names are Sarah Allen and Matthew Lau. They were in Point Reyes National Seashore, and they were observing elephant seals.

In December and January, the male elephant seals fast for two months. They go up on the beach and they gather a harem. And they spend most of their time fighting and mating. So they're basically like men in their twenties and thirties, from what I can tell. And they will have no concern for others except for their harem and then for their fighting and their dominance.

And these biologists were observing and they saw on January 27th, 2022, the most amazing thing happened. They saw a moment in which a mother elephant seal and her pup had gone down to the edge of the water, and the waves were breaking on them because it was so hot that they were trying to cool off in the water. Then a rogue wave hit them and the pup was carried out and the pup was too young to swim. And so the pup started to drown and the mother seal sat on the edge of the water and just began to bellow.

And one alpha male in charge of a harem heard her cry, and he went over to her and sniffed, and then he ran, or maybe moved the way elephant seals do, into the water. And he got behind the pup and nudged the pup forward. The biologists weren't sure he was using his flippers, but he gently put the pup from being 40 meters out to being four meters out. And the pup's little feet hit the sand and made it back to shore and survived.

And these biologists, they had not seen this behavior ever happen in the past. It was certainly self-sacrificial because when you are fasting and fighting and mating, every exercise you do depletes your energy stores. And this bull elephant seal was

concerned about his harem, which surprisingly was completely undisturbed when he began and finished his rescue attempt.

But his move, there was a sacrifice, a placing of someone else and their wellbeing above his own, the mother seal and the pup. And this, the biologists were struck by because they had never seen altruistic behavior in male elephant seals. And they remarked on this and they took pictures of it and it was published in this peer reviewed journal. And it caught the eyes of a couple of news outlets, and that's how I found it.

And so I have a picture on the front page of the bulletin of the male elephant seal after he has found out that there's a pup in trouble. And there he is, like a elephant seal version of David Hasselhoff, running into the surf as fast as he can. And even though he doesn't have hind legs, I find him majestic and I find him gallant and I find him beautiful.

And the last page of your bulletin, you can see the picture of the mother seal and her pup. The pup is completely exhausted and the mother is bellowing out this call of relief. And, of course, the seagull in the front of you there, that's like the weird guy at the gym who just stands in front of the weight rack and does nothing in particular for long periods of time, a kind of rando who just gets in the way of the picture.

And so you have this beautiful thing. And I saw this and I was deeply moved by the elephant seal's saintly behavior. And I began to pray about it. It just caught my attention and I actually came up with a title, like an Agatha Christie novel, the Curious Case of the Sainly Elephant Seal.

And I thought about it because in some ways, in every mystery, there's always a moral that is at stake. There's always something deeper to see. And I began to wonder about altruism in animals. It's not observed often in certain species, but that doesn't mean it's there. It's latent, hidden beneath the surface. Maybe found through some kind of connection that has not been observed by scientists. It's something powerful and real, but just hidden in plain sight.

And I began to write down as I prepared for this sermon, and to ask myself that maybe, maybe our desire for God is not something that we learn. Maybe our desire for God is not something that we can earn. Maybe our desire for God is not something that we adapt to or experience or is formed by our community. Maybe our desire for God is latent, inbuilt, and something that we somehow need to just let go rather than to simply acquire through habit or force or fasting effort. What if our desire for God is innate, latent, inbuilt, and not something we need to acquire through habituation, discipline, fasting, or effort?

And this struck me as powerful in this season of Lent. And so I wrote another line as I was praying, what would Lent look like if we put the love of God and God's

grace at the center of what we do, so that we might set this long dormant love inside us free? And what if Lent were not a time of abstaining, but of letting love lead us in a new way. I find this a bit controversial because for almost 2000 years, the Christian tradition has often believed that our desires for God had been lost in the fall. And that there was in its place, a kind of desire for human things, for things you can touch and taste and feel, and these become huge in our eyes.

And Lent was a time of stepping away from those things and giving up those things in order to make room for these desires for God that we have lost. This is why we fast as a tradition. This is why we spend time in prayer, to draw our attention from earthly things and to place them on heavenly things.

But what if things are not as we have heard? What if that desire for God is as innate as our eye color? What if it is always there and it's the things we do that get in the way? All of our readings point us in that direction to see everything we do as a spiritual discipline, as something that has to bring us in touch with that deeper desire for God that's always there.

Our reading from Isaiah is perfectly clear where the prophet says do not expect your fasting to make you better. If you want to become better, do a work of justice. Fast inside and not outside, and make the world a better place. Is this not the fast that I choose? And the promise and the blessing that we get in Isaiah is not that we would somehow attain some kind of status as a spiritual superhero, but that we would become, we read, like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail, like a source that comes from within, latent and dormant and waiting to burst forth.

In our reading from 2 Corinthians, Paul has this incredible moment in which we actually only need to surrender. Paul does not tell us that we have to become good or better or no more, or somehow distinguish ourselves in order to get God's grace. Rather, God's grace is always already there, and that's why he writes, see, now is the acceptable time. Now is the acceptable time, not when you get your life figured out, not when you have actually done these steps. Not when you have completed this certification, not when you have passed this test, not when you have gained that promotion, not when you have figured out your life and your love life. Now is the acceptable time. The grace of God is already with you.

And Jesus, in this magnificent reading from Matthew warns us about everything we are about to do on Ash Wednesday. He warns us against making this ash we put on our forehead, something that we will use to self justify, because when you self justify, you only become alienated from yourself. But instead create for yourself opportunities for grace by giving in such a way that the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing. Or by shutting yourself in secret and spending some time alone in prayer, or by engaging in some kind of work or life

that is seen by no one but God. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

What would Lent look like for you if your desire for God is not something that has ever eluded you but has always been there waiting for the moment in which it is set free? This too is a central part of the Christian tradition. At the end of his beautiful work, *Confessions*, Saint Augustine offers the following prayer, which is all about desire and life and love and God.

“Late have I loved you, beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved you! You were within but I outside, seeking there for you. And upon the shapely things you have made, I rushed headlong. I misshapen, but you were with me even when I was not with you. They held me back from you those things which have no thing, were they not in you. You called, shouted, broke through my deafness. You flared, blazed, banished my blindness. You lavished your fragrance on me, and I gasped. And now I pant for you. I tasted you and now I hunger and thirst. You touched me and I burned for your peace. When at the last I cling to you with my whole being, there will be no more anguish or labor for me, and my life will be alive, indeed alive because I'm filled with you.”

This Lent let Grace stand at the center of all that you do. Let the love of God that is waiting like a spring to burst forth in your heart, let it free.

Amen.