

God of the Penguins
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*Ask the animals and they shall be your teachers;
Become a disciple of the birds and they shall instruct you.*
—Job 12:7

Ancient Witness: Luke 12:22-31

This is one of my favorite passages in the Bible, with words that Jesus most likely really said, according to scholars. He was talking about living one's life with trust—trust in God—and overcoming fear and anxiety that can eat away at this trust and render one's life empty, hollow and painful.

Jesus said, “Consider the ravens... consider the lilies...” He used examples in nature to illustrate how to live one's life in faith—free of anxiety. As one might expect, he used examples that were close to home in Palestine. But I suspect that if he had lived further to the north, much further, he might have used other examples, such as penguins, for instance. Jesus certainly never saw a penguin.

Over the past several years, there have been great stories and movies about these remarkable birds.

There was the story about Wendell and Cass, two African black-footed penguins at the New York aquarium in Coney Island. Now, you should know that penguins mate for life. But given the disproportionate male-female ratio at the aquarium, some of the females flirt profusely and then dump their partners for single males with better nests.

Wendell and Cass, however, took no part in these cunning schemes. Back in 2002, Stephanie Mitchell, their keeper, said that they had been devoted to each other for over eight years. In fact, neither one had ever been with anyone else. And they both happen to be male. That is, they're gay.

This is really not that unusual. It's that people don't know about it. Bruce Bagemihl documented in his book, *Biological Exuberance*, homosexual behavior in over 450 species.

Wendell and Cass exhibited the same mating and sexual behavior as other couples, they just never laid any eggs. And it took a blood test to confirm that were both male.

Not too far away at the Central Park Zoo lived another pair of chinstrap penguins, Silo and Roy, and in 2005 they had been together and devoted to each other for six years. They exhibited what is called "ecstatic behavior," that is, they entwine their necks; they vocalize to each other; they have sex. They are also both male. They're gay.

When offered female companionship, they adamantly refuse it. And the females aren't interested in them, either.

One time, the two seemed so desperate to incubate an egg together that they put a rock in their nest and sat on it, keeping it warm. Rob Gramzay, the zookeeper took the egg from a young, inexperienced couple that laid an extra, and he gave it to Silo and Roy. So they cared for the egg and it hatched and Tango was born. For the next two and a half months they raised Tango, keeping her warm and feeding her food from their beaks until she could go out into the world on her own. They did a great job!

These are great stories about what penguins can teach us. There is no shame about being different. They simply are who they are. They inspire acceptance.

And what can really get us to "consider the penguins" is this remarkable documentary made 15 years ago with a follow up in 2017 titled, "March of the Penguins." If you haven't seen it, I highly recommend it.

It takes place in the Antarctica where the Emperor penguins hop up on shore and march over 70 miles on the ice to their breeding ground. After they mate and lay their eggs—one to a couple—the egg is carefully transferred from the female to the male. Because it is so cold, the eggs cannot rest on the ground, so the penguins keep them on the tops of their feet. And they carefully move the egg from the top of the female's feet to the male's. Then the females trek back over the ice back to the ocean while all the males stay behind, keeping the eggs warm.

Now, this is where the real drama begins. For over two and a half months these male penguins will not eat, losing about half of their body weight. Together they will endure the harshest circumstances on the planet for the lives of their offspring.

The weather begins to get worse and worse. The temperature drops to a brutal 80 degrees below zero, without the windchill! And then the winds pick up to gale-force. There is no more hostile en-

vironment on earth. And the way that they survive this ordeal is that they huddle together. Somehow as a group they can maintain enough warmth as that they and their eggs do not freeze to death. It's an absolutely incredible sight.

If they somehow get separated from the group, they don't last very long and perish. And in this group, they take turns standing on the outside of the circle, shielding those on the inside from the deadly wind. They are very careful when they walk, keeping the egg balanced on the top of their feet all the time.

This amazing scene has been playing out for thousands of years—all this time we have been unaware that this was happening, until recently.

Eventually, the worst weather ends and the eggs hatch, still with their fathers, who shield the baby chicks from the cold. Meanwhile, the mothers are marching back over the ice, having regained their body weight they have lost. They arrive in the nick of time, like the cavalry, to take the chicks from the males and give them their first meal.

There is another incredible moment when the males appear to be saying good-bye to the chicks—they seem reluctant to leave—imprinting their voices so they can recognize each other when they are later reunited. And then the males all leave together and begin their trek over the expanse of ice back to the sea before they die of starvation.

It's now time for the females to feed and raise the chicks, waiting for the males to return. When they do, eventually, the females are able to return one more time to the ocean and the source of food. But before they do, they are able to share time as a family.

Finally, after they have eaten and grown, the young penguins and their fathers make their way to the ocean for a last time. By this time the ice has receded, and they don't have so far to go. The species has successfully produced another generation as it has done for a millennia.

“Consider the penguins,” I thought. Can we, sometimes “people of little faith,” learn from them? Can we learn about love and endurance, trust and sacrifice?

Sometimes life is hard, and we ask ourselves “what's the point?” Sometimes meaning and purpose seem to elude us. For these creatures we see that life itself is inherently worthwhile. They don't need promises of heaven to move on. They find their hope in the act of living. They don't find ultimate significance in status or achievement or possessions.

As human beings, we sometimes have to endure hardships—just read the news. It wasn't too long ago that we faced hardships as a nation, such as the Great Depression and then the Second World War. And now, a global pandemic is still infecting and killing people. And as a species, we are facing totally environmental collapse.

We have the means to withstand this pandemic. We have the intelligence to have developed vaccines. And in the absence of that, we discovered that masks and distancing are effective. And yet,

we seem incapable of prioritizing the survival of the group. We are so fixated upon individual freedom that more than 30% of the people refuse to do their part to shield the whole group from the harsh and deadly virus. The youngest among us need our protection, as they cannot receive the vaccine yet. How far away we are from the level of sacrifice the penguins demonstrate for the survival of their young!

We also know that we must huddle together not just as a nation, but globally. We must dramatically increase the production of the vaccine for the poorer countries in Africa, South America and Asia. This must be a top priority, not just because it is a moral imperative to protect them, but the longer the virus circulates the more it will mutate into deadlier variants, threatening everyone.

And we also know how to meet the challenge of environmental destruction and collapse. But we lack the will. We are divided over a lust for power and control. Disinformation and lies, fear and mistrust, are a badge of membership into a tribe. But as long as we place the dominance of our tribe over the well-being of the whole, over the well-being of future generations, we will not have learned what we need to know to flourish and survive. As it is written in the book of Job: “Ask the animals and they shall be your teachers; Become a disciple of the birds and they shall instruct you.”

Can we learn from the animals? Can we band together? Make sacrifices to survive?

Let us “consider the penguins.” For them, the survival of the individual depends upon the survival of the whole. They cannot be separated. Each is willing to take its turn on the outside of the circle. Each is willing to endure, to sacrifice for the next generation. Let the penguins teach us how to be truly civilized. Let them instruct us on how to find meaning and purpose amidst the harshest struggles of life.