

focus on. We hold up the scriptures to what we see happening in the world, and we try to act accordingly. We tune our ears to hear God telling us matters most: and certainly what matters is sharing love and compassion, doing justice and kindness, being a steward of all that God has given.

So as we have come to the time of year where we make financial pledges to God the church, let it be that wider understanding of stewardship that guides what you write down on your card. Let us remember that the pledges we make are tangible ways we promise to care for others, from the children and seniors in our pews or watching at home to the people receiving food from the Mobile Pantry. Those pledges are a way that we sometimes take a risk or make a sacrifice. Let your giving be motivated by this congregation's impulse to care for others, to protect them, and to steward their needs, just as God does for us. As the psalmist says, "in wisdom, God has made them all; the earth is full of God's creatures."

Back in 2016, I started following the story of Wisdom the Albatross. This amazing sea bird was first tagged by scientists at Midway Atoll in 1956. Since then, she has hatched perhaps 40 chicks and has flown so many miles, the distance would equal more than six trips from earth to the moon and back again.⁴ Wisdom is now 74 years old.⁵ The risks to her and other sea birds continue to grow. But Wisdom has been amazingly resilient. She survived a tsunami in 2011, went missing on several occasions, and endured the death of her original male breeding partner. But she persists in living the life she has been called to: soaring over the seas, raising and protecting her young, and now, inspiring humanity's awe at the wonders of creation. This bird has no sense of faith or religion. But by her very living, she praises God and teaches us to do the same. By her enduring life, she urges us to care for all the wonders God has made. May we act as stewards to care for all that God has entrusted to us, both creatures and our human neighbors, great and small, young and old, nearby and faraway.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

1 Sheri McWhirter, "Extremely rare yellow northern cardinal identified at Michigan backyard bird feeder," MLive, January 5, 2025, <https://www.mlive.com/environment/2025/01/extremely-rare-yellow-northern-cardinal-identified-at-michigan-backyard-birdfeeder.html>.

2 Jane Araff, "Another casualty of Israel's war in Lebanon: efforts to save endangered turtles," January 22, 2025, NPR, <https://www.npr.org/2025/01/22/nx-s1-5203017/israel-lebanon-endangered-sea-turtles>

3 <https://www.hughlh.com/2025/01/20/not-nothing.html>

4 Bill Chappell, "An old bird can hatch a new chick - even at age 65," NPR, February 10, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/02/10/466269485/an-old-bird-can-hatch-a-new-chick-even-at-age-65>

5 Bill Chappell, "She's 74 and expecting: Wisdom the albatross astounds once again," NPR, December 6, 2024. <https://www.npr.org/2024/12/06/nx-s1-5220094/shes-74-and-expecting-wisdom-the-albatross-astounds-once-again>



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

February 2, 2025

Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

"All Creatures: yellow cardinals and 74 year old birds"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Psalm 104:1-4; 10-25

Just before Christmas, a couple who live northeast of Lansing looked out the window of their home to their backyard bird feeder. Arlene and John McDaniel have fed the birds for years and love to watch all the species that show up at their feeder. But on this morning, they were astonished at what they saw: a bright *yellow* cardinal was on the ground near their feeder. Most of us know that male cardinals are bright red, easy to spot in the snow. Arlene wasn't sure if she could trust her eyes, so she asked John to come take a look, too. They both agreed: it was a northern cardinal and it was yellow!

You can look up photos of the bird online and it's amazing to see. Scientists say a yellow cardinal is a one-in-ten million occurrence. The cause is a genetic mutation, a small change in the bird's DNA. The Michigan Audubon Conservation Manager said of the McDaniel's sighting, "It goes to show that even birds that we consider ordinary can in fact be extraordinary and that if you don't take a second to look around, you might not see it."¹

Seeing something like a yellow cardinal fills us with wonder at God's amazing creation. It leads us to a sense of "wow" that the Psalmist felt when singing about the natural world. The psalm, though, is not just a song of awe about cool things in nature. It is especially praise for God for nourishing creation each day. God provides food and water for the animals; God orders the cosmos; God offers love and care for lions, birds, and people. This psalm is the first time in the scriptures that we see the Hebrew word "Hallelujah," which means, "praise God!" Hallelujah is an exclamation of joy and thanksgiving, inspired by the wonders God has made.

God cares mightily for all that God has made—living things, both great and small. That includes us humans, who are made in God's image. Being made in the image of God means we have something of the divine within us. And that we are called to follow God's lead in how we live and act. When we see the birds building their nests in the treetops or goats trekking along

a mountain ridge, our call is to notice and enjoy them. But also, to follow God in being caretakers of these creatures and their homes.

The roots of the word *steward* point to someone who is a caretaker. A steward is a guardian who watches over treasures—things or creatures that are important. This is the season of the year when our church hones in on the concept of stewardship. Church folk have come to equate that word with the annual financial pledge campaign. And that's not wrong. It's just a limited understanding. Because stewardship is so much broader than that, too. Stewardship has to do with our care and protection of the creatures great and small around us and the wider environment. Stewardship is caring for our neighbors and community. Stewardship is using wisely our own resources and faithfully managing what has been entrusted to our church - financial and physical resources, and most importantly, the people. Watching over what is important to us, managing it wisely, and praising God for the wonder of it all—that is the heart of stewardship.

We got to hear from Jim and Bonnie this morning about the Mobile Food Pantry. This ministry is all about stewardship—stewarding food and protecting and caring for the people in our community. The volunteers work to rescue thousands of pounds of food every week, which is a way of caring for the environment. They ensure that the water and soil used to grow the food was not wasted. They make sure the bread, meats, vegetables, and fruits which can no longer be sold, but are still good to eat, do not pollute a landfill by being thrown out. And then, they ensure that people in our wider community who might not have enough food to eat, can fill their plates in a healthy way. As we heard, their ministry particularly watches over older neighbors, as they distribute the food at various senior living communities. Through the pantry housed here, this congregation helps care for God's people great and small, old and young. All are valuable in God's sight.

The pantry volunteers also set an example, reminding us that stewardship of God's creation and creatures sometimes involves the giving of ourselves in significant ways. The volunteers have made this ministry their life's work and vocation. They are up early, sorting and packing food, driving it around town in a vehicle they personally purchased specially for this effort. The sacrifices they've made and the way they live reflects that sense of "Hallelujah" through their actions.

When we act as stewards of God's creatures and creation, we are often called to take risks, or to make a sacrifice. This past fall, Fadia Joumaa and a few fellow volunteers met on a beach of the Mediterranean Sea near the Lebanese-Israeli border.² They were there to help the hatching

green sea turtles make their way to the water. Female turtles travel thousands of miles to lay their eggs on the same sands where they were born, immediately returning to the water afterward and leaving their eggs all alone to face their destiny. Most baby turtles don't make it. For any turtle that safely hatches and makes it to the sea, there is then only a 1 in 1000 chance of it surviving to adulthood. With those tough odds, and new threats like ingesting plastic or getting caught up in fishing nets, the future looks bleak for green sea turtles. They are nearly extinct.

Joumaa and the volunteers in Lebanon have been trying to care for and protect these special creatures. They have learned to take the temperature of the sand and to cover the nests of eggs with metal grates to prevent them being eaten by wild dogs and foxes. Their nightly work to help the turtles in the past drew crowds of tourists to observe the amazing sight of tiny turtles making their way to the water. But in late September, Joumaa and the volunteers had to stop their work. The beach came under bombardment by Israeli air strikes. Even though a cease-fire took hold in November, the beach is still not safe. The human toll of the conflict has been high, especially in Lebanon. But even as they seek to protect their families and neighbors, the volunteers' hearts are turned to these creatures that God has made and cared for. A handful of volunteers have chosen to risk the personal dangers of coming to the beach so that the turtles have a chance to thrive. Of the turtles they've been able to usher to the sea, they hope one or two will make it to adulthood. And that hope makes their sacrifice worth it. To risk life and limb to care for God's creatures is stewardship of the highest order. How manifold are God's works! And how amazing are the human creatures who use their lives to care for others.

When we look out at the world, there is so much to praise. God has given us wonders without measure. God cares for us in all times and places. And yet, there is also much to fear and lament. Many of us have concerns about the safety of neighbors and siblings who, because of their immigration status or gender identity, are facing new risks just to go about their lives. Too many people are out of work. Health concerns among those we love never cease.

But sometimes, caring for others as a steward, even making a sacrifice to do so, is what heals us in difficult times. I read on a blog post this week, "There is a lot I do not like about the world right now, but on a day where many bad things happened, I managed to make good food and feed my family, and that is not nothing."³ Making food, feeding those who need to be fed, giving shelter or comfort to neighbors or creatures is stewardship. And when we come to this church, those are the actions of faith we try to