

A NATURAL GRACE

March 2010

We awake on the first Sunday of the year. The outside thermometer reads six lonely degrees. The wind chill factor plummets to the indecent range. A hurried foray out of doors confirms the brutality. The other pastor with whom I serve is preaching today, and I plan to worship with one of our sister congregations lying south of here. But now, the idea of the trip depresses. It is so cold outside and so warm inside. I read the Epiphany-pointed Scripture passages the congregation will hear when it gathers. Silence follows. Then comes a prayer of thanksgiving and intercession, concluded with the Lord's Prayer. With that, a decision is made: we're skipping church.

By Sunday School time a fire roars in the fireplace. Splits of Sugar Maple crackle. Over the course of the day we read three newspapers. We feed ourselves a brunch of bacon and eggs, toast and grits. We also feed birds.

Days like today bring out the birds in great number. They've had a rough night, shivering away whatever calories they were able to gain yesterday. They are fortunate to reach this morning, and to have enough energy in reserve to hunt for something to warm their little bird bellies.

The standard, back yard ornithological cast takes the stage, gobbling up seeds at an expensive rate: Cardinals, Juncos, Tufted Titmice, etc., etc., etc. A Mockingbird commandeers an apple quarter before the juice within freezes. Downy and Red-bellied Woodpeckers work over suet cakes. Joining these more colorful birds are Starlings by the score. All these feathered friends have come to eat, but the Starlings are the hungriest birds on the planet.

The ground, frozen solid, might as well be concrete. Remnants from a skiff of snow hang around in white tatters, shifting and recollecting under that fierce wind. The landscape screams bleak. Forbidding. Hopeless.

To feed crows, grackles, and starlings, along with our raccoon, opossum and skunk neighbors, I buy cheap dog food. But I haven't done so lately, so the supply is running low. By late morning, it's all gone. A search ensues. I discover some half-full boxes of sugary, long-stale cereal that used to be favored by our son. Old heels of sandwich bread and left-over corn bread also present themselves. Then I remember what these critters crave this time of year when insects are rare to non-existent: animal protein and animal fat. A coffee can full of congealed bacon grease contains both. Collected over the last year, it sits in the cabinet next to the stove.

In an old aluminum pan, these ingredients are mixed together, along with a generous sprinkle of Quaker Oats and uneaten grits from breakfast. The bacon grease spoons out in thick gray globs that are soon studded with morsels of FrankenBerry and Captain Crunch. The concoction looks positively disgusting. Shivering, I set it out in the middle of the yard, beat it back inside, and wait. At least a hundred starlings soon make squat, dark figures in the bare trees. A few scouts dive to the ground. After an experimental peck or two, they stand in the pan and dig vigorously into the food. Paying attention to their body language, the whole flock descends as one for a loud, pushy, frenzied Sunday dinner. No one asks anyone to pass the corn bread, please.

There's a lot not to like about Starlings. Few people compliment their appearance. Many interpret their behavior as greedy, crass, and ill-mannered. They are hard to tell apart; individuals do not stand out in this breed. They will occupy your attic — in your home or in your church — if you give them half a chance. They also compete with Blue Jays, Woodpeckers and other birds who depend on nesting holes in trees. They will eat anything, and often assault farms and feed mills with their appetite and their waste.

When they form massive flocks in the fall and winter, roosting in trees, starlings create a huge mess. If they settle in a city, they can certainly take the luster off urban living.

Worst of all, they are non-native interlopers in North America, having been introduced from Europe by a well-meaning lover of both birds and Shakespeare. They push aside the native song birds that are more universally prized. They are like invasive weeds, absorbing scarce resources, upsetting ancient balances. Predators aren't genetically programmed to lunch on starlings, and so much of the time they fly under the hawk's radar.

But Starlings do have their merits. A closer examination of their plumage reveals dark brown feathers washed with a prism of iridescence and spangled with silvery dots, markings especially prominent in winter. They are well named, with a star map of the night sky covering their round bodies.

Their exhibition of communal living is impressive. They depend upon and are protected by their numbers. It's key to their resiliency and survival. On the wing, a large flock of Starlings remind one of a school of fish, flying in perfect formation, changing direction on a dime, tightening and loosening their pattern as if they share one mind, one thought.

Like human interlopers from Europe, the illegal immigration of Starlings into North America has long been a settled situation. They adjusted to their new land many generations ago, and the land, one assumes, is adjusting to them. And just where do we Americans get off calling Starlings greedy?

The Starlings who visit our back yard this Lord's Day finish their homemade dinner in maybe five minutes. They re-populate the trees, and several can be seen rubbing their beaks against branches. Yeah, pork fat can be a bit sticky. But maybe it will get them through the night that will fall fast and frigid upon them.

This cold, cold Sunday without formal worship is yet a day of praise. Chattering Starlings join cawing Crows and shrieking Blue Jays to offer the God of All Being a joyful noise. I'm thankful to witness it and be able to support this avian choir. In feeding, I am fed.