

The Power of Observation

- ⁶Go to the ant, you lazybones; consider its ways, and be wise.
⁷Without having any chief or officer or ruler,
⁸it prepares its food in summer, and gathers its sustenance in harvest.
⁹How long will you lie there, O lazybones? When will you rise from your sleep?
¹⁰A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest,
¹¹and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want, like an armed warrior.
- ¹²A scoundrel and a villain goes around with crooked speech,
¹³winking the eyes, shuffling the feet, pointing the fingers,
¹⁴with perverted mind devising evil, continually sowing discord;
¹⁵on such a one calamity will descend suddenly; in a moment, damage beyond repair.
- ¹⁶There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him:
¹⁷haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,
¹⁸a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil,
¹⁹a lying witness who testifies falsely, and one who sows discord in a family.
²⁰My child, keep your father's commandment,
and do not forsake your mother's teaching.
²¹Bind them upon your heart always; tie them around your neck.
²²When you walk, they will lead you; when you lie down, they will watch over you;
and when you awake, they will talk with you.
²³For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light,
and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life

When I was a boy the street I lived on ran alongside a giant drainage ditch. The street was named *Brookside Drive*. I suppose Brookside does sound nicer than Drainage Ditch Drive, but that's really what it was. Today they've paved the whole thing over, so it snakes through the suburbs like the fossilized belly of a snake, but when I was a boy it was mostly grass and rocks with all kinds of little lizards and frogs and crawfish. It was just humming with life, and especially during the summer, I spent a lot of hours down there. One of our favorite things to do was to damn up parts of it- we could spend all day doing that. One time we had it damned up almost the whole way across for nearly a week before a storm came and washed our work away.

It wasn't perfect, though, there were dangers. Other than older boy, the worst thing was probably the ants. There were two major kinds of ants we would run into down there- there were these red ants that had these impossibly enormous heads with these teensy tiny little thoraxes and abdomens. They looked INCREDIBLY frightening with these huge heads, but I myself was never bitten by one and none of my friends were either. And then, there were the tiny, little black and amber fire ants, which of course, were absolutely awful if you happened to step by accident into one of their mounds.

Now if you didn't grow up there and didn't know much about the creatures there, you would be absolutely sure to avoid those giant red headed monsters. They looked like they could take one of your fingers off. But really, the ones you actually had to watch out for were the tiny, innocuous looking fire ants. Small animals like baby calves and goats are killed every Spring- they stumble into a mound and aren't able to get out. And two years ago one elderly man was killed by fire ants in Florida when he was swarmed by a colony of ants escaping the flood waters.

But you wouldn't guess this, you'd only know this from living there, from watching these tiny little creatures- from observing them and their behavior with some care.

Today I realize that all that observation, all that time spent looking at ants- that all that biology I was doing was really a form of theology.

If that seems like a strange way to talk about it- it didn't used to be. For most of the church's history we have seen the natural world as a kind of mirror to God. Medieval

theologians talked about God writing two books- the book of nature and the book of God, or the Bible. And you could learn about God by studying either text.

The greatest American theologian, Jonathan Edwards- the first paper he ever published wasn't about the Bible or God per se, but it was a paper he wrote on these amazing spiders in New England that spin a kind of web that catches the wind and actually lifts the spiders into the air like little hang gliders or kite boarders. But if you would have asked Edwards, he would have said that what he was doing was just as much theology as biology. See, he believed he was seeing the very hand of God by observing this unusual animal behavior.

And it's a belief that's really all through the Biblical. Psalm 19 that we heard earlier talks about the heavens telling of God's glory and the firmament proclaiming God's handiwork- that is nature itself is like a preacher speaking to us, albeit without words, but speaking to us nevertheless about who God is and what God is up to.

Genesis begins with God not just creating humanity- but God creating everything, creating all creatures, all life, and calling it all good. And Noah- Noah doesn't just save people, but of course, he loads up the animals, two by two, into the ark. And the wisdom literature, Job through the Song of Songs, the wisdom literature talks about animals being teachers to humanity, being models for us of how live in harmony with God's good creation. My personal favorite Biblical animal moment probably comes from Jonah where at the end not only the Ninevite people but the animals, the cows and sheep, wear sack cloth and ashes, too, to show their repentance. In Jonah even the cows are coming down for the altar call.

Scripture holds a high view of God's creation- creation in scripture is a kind of mirror to God, and by observing creation, by studying creation, we can learn something about God, as well.

This is what's going on in the Proverb this morning. Go to the ants, it tells us! Go to the ants and watch them, and by observing them, become wise. And the writer here shows exactly how to do this.

Now, normally, this passage seems to be read in a kind of moralistic way- we focus on the author calling us 'lazybones' and urging us to rise from our sleep, and we get to thinking this text is about action, and work, and self improvement. And the ants kind of amplify this message. When we think about ants, we normally think about them as workers. We get all excited about how much ants can carry. We talk about how industrious they are. But work and self improvement- this isn't what the writer in Proverbs is focused on here at all.

No, the writer here has actually spent an enormous time with these ants and has noticed something fascinating. They've noticed that the ants do something very strange- these ants harvest their food, that is they gather it store it up, saving it for later. The ants somehow know how to look past, to look underneath times when they seem to have an abundance, and plan for leaner times.

The ants the writer was probably observing are known as harvester ants, or *Messor Arenarius*. And they really are amazing. *Messor Arenarius* eat two kinds of things- they eat grass, which has very nutritional value for them, and then they eat seeds, which are amazing for them, rich with everything an ant could want. And here's the

amazing thing- there are really two seasons in Israel, the dry, hot summer months, and the less hot rainy months in the winter. The seeds and the grass are both plentiful during the rainy season, but then the grass withers and the seeds are all gone during the summer. Somehow the ant is able to just harvest the seeds, just harvest and not eat their favorite food, during the rainy season and just live on grass. Then, when the summer comes and the grass is gone, they live off the seeds they stored up.

Really at every level this text is about observing the world- and seeing it as clearly as possible. It's certainly true on the writer's part- some person had to be observing, studying these ants for months at a time. They had to be watching where they were going and what they were eating- they probably dug into a nest or two to see the stock piles of seeds.

And of course the ants themselves are incredibly observant, too, somehow. Somehow they have this ability to see past the times when they have a bonanza of grass and seeds and could be feasting day and night to a time when the grass would be gone.

And when we read down past the piece on ants to the warnings below- it's the same thing. When the author writes about what God dislikes- laziness in action isn't even mentioned. The top two things to beware of are haughty eyes- eyes that are turned only upon ourselves, and tongues that lie about the world, tongues that don't tell the truth about what we see.

In short it's a passage calling us to the hard work of observing the world around us as it is- all in the belief that we will learn not just about the world, but about God and ourselves.

I learned about an incredible person this week- one of those amazing people no one has ever heard about. His name is Ed Wilson, and he is the world's foremost expert on ants. His career in biology started early- he grew up in Alabama, and when he was a boy he was at the coast and saw a huge jellyfish well up in the surf. And he said he was just fascinated with it- he just wanted to know everything about it. It was a hunger that would stay with him his whole life.

His career in ants came about by a kind of accident. Once when he was fishing he caught a spiny backed fish with these terrible dart like bones sticking out- and when he pulled it up out of the water it slammed into one of his eyes, blinding him for a while. And then, when some of his vision came back, he was really only able to see small things very well. And so, his interests naturally turned to ants.

At 16 Ed was the first person in Alabama to identify the fire ant as an invasive species. He actually wrote the paper that was presented to the state- a published scientist and not even out of high school. He wound up at Harvard and has written over 60 books, published untold articles, and has received the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction no less than twice, the only person in history with that distinction.

One of the things that made Ed famous was his discovery that ants communicate using chemicals. They have lay down these different chemical signals that tell each other where food is or whether there is danger. His favorite chemical signal is the one that

marks whether an ant has died or not- it's aleic acid. When an ant dies this forms naturally, and all the other ants will pick up an ant who has shuffled off his mortal coil and dump him outside the nest. He found that if you mark a live ant with aleic acid, the other ants don't give a hoot whether it's wriggling around or not- they still pick him up and dump him outside the nest and they'll keep getting rid of him until he's gotten the smell off. It's like that scene in *The Holy Grail* when Eric Idle is going through the town yelling "Bring out yer dead!" and then John Cleese is carrying this old guy slumped over his shoulder with the old guy complaining, "But I'm not dead yet. I'm getting better." And John Cleese saying, "No you're not, you'll be stone dead in a moment."

The thing that's amazing about Ed isn't just all his achievements with ants, but that his careful study of ants taught him how to how be a careful observer of all life. Wilson is most famous for making links between his study of ants with all forms of life everywhere- especially humans. And as interested in the spiritual as the material he's a leading figure amongst those trying find ways to help science and religion to coexist in ways that help each other rather than tear each other down. He writes: "Religion and science are the two most powerful forces on earth and should come together to save all creation." And all this from looked to the ants and considered their ways. All this because he learned how to be an observer.

This week on January 6th we celebrate Epiphany- the day when the magi made that exhausting trek across deserts and mountains to search for the Christ child.

So much is made of the star- astronomers from Johannes Kepler forward have offered up various theories on what might have happened. And folks normally are all

trying to come up with these flashy scenarios like Halley's comet or maybe a supernova- something that would have just been utterly astonishing. But none of these theories link up with the probably date very well, and to me it all misses the point anyway. Matthew says what's astounding about the story isn't the star- but the magi's observation of it. They literally spent their lives gazing up into the night sky- observing and studying what most of us simply take for granted- always in the belief that it would tell them something terribly important one day. It's the level of care and observation that's unusual- not the astronomical event. But of course we've always been a people more interested in proof than faith.

It's the New Year. There are no end of folks out there telling us what we need to do and what we need to change to improve ourselves in the New Year. We all get these ideas about losing a thousand pounds, eating nothing but celery and tree bark, and reading five books a day. This time of year we get all these ideas about what we could be- what, maybe, we should be. As if God's blessing, God's presence, might be waiting for us just after that next achievement, that next goal that's crossed off our list.

I wonder if a more faithful New Year's resolution might be to take a page from Proverbs, and from the magi, and rather than spend all this energy focused on how what we need to change and what we need to become- maybe we might learn better how to observe ourselves and the world around us, and learn to see not how God might be present if we change, but how God is already living, and moving, and being already, right in our midst.

In the name of the one who created the ants, the humans, and the stars all out of the same material and called it all good, amen.