

Genesis 1:20–23  
Wed. of Laetare (Lent IV)  
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.  
March 22, 2023

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

*And God said, “Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.” So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.*

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

This evening we consider the fifth day of creation, when God created the fish and the birds. As the sun, moon, and stars on the fourth day were created to adorn the light and darkness of day one, so were the creatures that swim and the creatures that fly created on the fifth day to adorn the firmament, which God created on the second day. The last three days of creation correspond perfectly with the first three days of creation, showing us again how our God is a God of order. I say “creatures that swim” and “creatures that fly” because the biblical categories are more loosely defined than current scientific sensibilities. In the Bible, God lumps everything together that swims in the water and everything together that flies in the air (Leviticus 11). The basic distinction here is between what swims and what flies, not necessarily our more recent classification systems.

Swarming creatures is a near perfect description of the animals created on the fifth day. If you’ve seen videos of a school of fish moving about, or flocks of starlings or grackles feeding from field to field, or a cloud of gnats, then you know what swarming looks like. None of these groups has a distinctive leader or marching signal. Each individual follows the next and some semblance of order appears in what must be utter chaos. The fish and the birds can mirror the

chaotic, unstable environment they inhabit. The individual so often plays a role in a larger group. You see this in people as well, for good and for bad.

Creatures that swarm in the waters could include everything from what lives in a puddle to the darkest depths of the oceans. The deeper you go the stranger the creatures become. In Biology, there's a concept called "deep sea gigantism" or "abyssal gigantism." The farther down you get into the ocean the bigger the creatures become. From Blue Whales to Giant Squid, the creatures of the deep are magnificent and awe-inspiring, and also quite scary. The Prophet Isaiah speaks about "Leviathan the fleeing serpent . . . the dragon that is in the sea" (Is 27:1). Psalm 74[:14] describes Leviathan as having many heads, which the LORD crushes, reminding us of Satan and the other creatures of the spiritual abyss. And yet the creature Leviathan was "formed to play in the sea, great and wide, which teems with creatures innumerable, living things both small and great," as Palm 104[:26] puts it. The great sea creatures, then, also proclaim the glory of our maker.

We also think of the great fish that swallowed up Jonah, a picture of the death, burial, and resurrection of our LORD Jesus Christ. As Jesus says: "just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt 12:40). Our LORD descended into His watery grave and left our sins buried there when He rose from the dead. Even today, we are baptized into the death of Christ in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life (Rom 6:4). Baptism with water indicates a watery death of the Old Adam, that a new man should daily emerge, like the great fish spewing up Jonah. No wonder the Early Church fathers, for example Gregory of Nyssa, described the devil's seeming victory at the cross as a fish tricked by the bait on a hook: "the Deity was hidden under the veil of our nature, that so,

as with ravenous fish, the hook of the Deity might be gulped down along with the bait of flesh, and thus, life being introduced into the house of death.” With His death our Lord destroyed death for us and the power of the Devil over us.

Of course, fish are not only associated with what is abysmal and monstrous in Scripture. Jesus called fishermen to become fishers of men (Matt 4:19), and the Kingdom of Heaven is compared to a net thrown into the sea to gather every kind of fish. The angels then separate the evil from the righteous, just like a fisherman sorting fish, or like Jesus separating the sheep from the goats. Those clothed in the righteousness of Christ will be welcomed into eternal life. The rest will be thrown into the fiery furnace (Matt 13:47–50).

Jesus Himself loved to eat fish. He multiplied the two fish along with the five loaves to feed over 5,000 people, as we heard in last week’s Gospel Lesson. And after the Resurrection of our LORD, He causes yet another miraculous catch of fish at the Sea of Tiberias, when the disciples come to shore to find Jesus cooking fish and bread at a charcoal fire (John 21). Luke 24 has Jesus eating broiled fish to prove His physical resurrection from the dead. This was no spirit, but the very flesh and blood Jesus who died for our sins and physically rose again from the dead.

There’s also the early Christian symbol of the fish, the *ichthys*, which you see so often on the cars and homes of Christians. The “sign of the fish” dates back to the 2nd century A.D., and was widespread by the 3rd and 4th centuries. The Sibylline Oracles say the Greek word for fish, *ichthys*, has an acrostic meaning, the letters standing for: “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.” The fish symbol was used during the persecutions of the church as a way for Christians to recognize other Christians. You can still see the *ichthys* on gravestones and catacombs from the early centuries of the New Testament Church all around the Mediterranean Sea.

The flying creatures, the birds, are also found throughout Scripture and in the history of Christianity. In the Old Testament, the clean birds could be eaten, and of course sacrificed as well. Jesus tells us to be “innocent as doves,” which is an interesting picture when you consider how innocent doves were sacrificed in the Temple, especially by those who could not afford anything more (Lev 12:6–8). That’s why a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons were sacrificed when the forty day old Jesus was presented at the Temple (Luke 2:24).

The flying of birds in the heights of the heavens is a picture of the glory and majesty to which our LORD raises us. On our own we can’t do it. Isaiah 40[:31] says that “they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles.” Or as our closing hymn puts it: “Praise to the Lord, who o’er all things is wondrously reigning And, as on wings of an eagle, uplifting, sustaining.” Our Lord raises us up and sustains us as He does the birds of the sky. No wonder Jesus admonishes us to be like the birds in our simple trust of God the Father: “Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” (Matt 6:26). It is the LORD who gives food to the young ravens that cry (Ps 147:9). The birds remind us of our utter dependance on God: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father” (Matt 10:29). The birds follow the LORD in all simplicity, to the shame of God’s people (Jer 8:7). The sparrow finds a home in the courts of the LORD, and the swallow a nest for herself and her young at the LORD’s altars, ever singing the LORD’s praises with those who dwell in the house of the LORD (Ps 84). Our Lord Jesus Christ also gathers His people as a mother hen gathers her brood under her wings (Matt 23:37), bringing us into His Church to sustain us in body and soul to life everlasting.

So it is in the eschatological Temple, the End Times Temple of Christ's body, the Church, in eternal glory. The prophet Ezekiel draws on the language of Genesis 1 as he describes water flowing out of the Temple and into the sea, making the water fresh: "And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish. For this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes" (Ez 47:9). That's why Revelation also describes the new heavens and the new earth as no longer having the sea (Rev 21:1). The chaotic waters will be stilled, like a sea of glass (Rev 4:6; 15:9) and water will again perfectly bear life and abundance, as at the beginning. The waters will not be chaotic, turbulent, and filled with monsters, but teeming with life. There, the mother hen will call her chicks home and our LORD will uplift us as on wings of an eagle, sustaining us for all eternity. May the fish and the birds ever remind us of these eternal truths. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Magnificat.