

# Story and Meditation: Strange Covenant

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Psalm 22:23-31

Mark 8:31-38

by *Eric Anderson*

The fledglings were, well, fledged. Their wing feathers had grown in, and they'd taken their first flights. Parents and children and other parents and other children and grandmothers and grandfathers had begun to gather into the flocks of early summer. There were 'alawi (or Hawai'i Creeper) in their greenish tan, and 'akepa in orange, and 'amakihi in greenish yellow. Yes, it was flocking season, and that meant for the younger ones it was time for:

Flight school.

That's very exciting.

The best flier in this year's class was a young 'alawi. He may not have had the brightest feathers in the flock, but he could put them to use. He could go from sitting still on a branch to full speed in an instant. He was faster than any of the other youngsters and even a few of the adults. He could turn on a wingtip. Every once in a while he'd fly full speed directly toward a tree and, just when you thought he'd crash, he'd be sitting peacefully on a branch, settling his feathers into place. Everybody thought he was amazing.

There was only one thing he wasn't good at, and that was, well, paying attention.

This happens sometimes with creatures who get really good at something. They start to think they don't have anything to learn. Worse, they forget that others do have things to learn. And even worse, they might even forget that others are around.

Flight school lessons began to get... complicated. The flock of fledglings would form up, start to work on a maneuver, and suddenly a streak of greenish tan would flash through the middle of them, sending greenish tan and orange and greenish yellow birds scattering. The teachers would patiently reassemble the flock and then the greenish tan would zoom through from another direction, scattering everybody else again.

He wasn't actually trying to disturb everybody. He was simply flying, and he was so confident of his skill that he didn't avoid the flock until he was right on top of them. He knew he wouldn't hit anybody, even if they didn't seem to realize that. He also didn't pay enough attention to what was behind him to realize that flight school was breaking up every time he flew through. He was just flying. That's all. Just flying.

He was just flying when another bird caught up. It was another 'alawi, an older 'alawi, one of the flight school instructors. "We have to talk," he said.

Their wings kept beating along as the teacher explained that he couldn't keep doing these things. It wasn't fair to the other students. It wasn't fair to the instructors. And it wasn't doing him any good to give up learning.

That stung. "I'm already the best!" he said. "What do I have to learn?"

The instructor nodded as his wings rose and fell. "Yes, you're the best now. But if you stop learning and others keep learning, don't you think they might catch up? Don't you think they might get better than you? I wasn't the best flier of my flight school class. But I caught up with you just now, didn't I?"

The young 'alawi didn't have anything to say to that.

"One other thing you haven't learned at all," said the teacher, "is to fly with others. Every last bird in that flock knows more about that than you. If you're going to be the best flier around, you're going to have to learn that, too."

History doesn't say whether our young friend remained the best flier of his age. It does say, however, that he decided to go on learning, and so the other birds could go on learning, too.

This conversation continues the one in which Peter had proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah. Jesus promptly began to define his own role, the way that he would be a Messiah, which was not what they expected. As D. Mark Davis writes at his blog *Left Behind and Loving It*, "Discipleship of the suffering son of man is different than discipleship of the Christ/Messiah. One is a godly reflective decision to accept rejection, suffering, dying, and rising; the other is a human reflective decision to 'gain the whole world.'"

Jesus insisted on the former. His trajectory, guided by his concern for the wellbeing of all humanity, would take him to Jerusalem not as a conqueror, but as a teacher; not as a soldier, but as a healer; not in power, but with power made perfect in weakness.

We know what the alternative looked like. A Jewish rebellion against the Romans resulted in a fire that burned the Temple around forty years after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Sixty years later there was a second rebellion, led by someone who claimed to be the Messiah, and this time the Romans rebuilt Jerusalem as a Romans-only city. The Emperor Hadrian built a temple to Jerusalem on the Temple Mount.

Truly, those who would save their lives through armed rebellion would lose them.

Something else, however, is on my mind this week. National Public Radio reporters Jeff Brady and Dan Charles described the efforts of natural gas utilities to secure their industry's – and

their fuel's – place in America's energy economy. When Flagstaff, Arizona, wanted to put new rules in place that required new construction to have electric rather than gas service, rules that would have significantly reduced carbon emissions, these companies went to the state legislature for a law that would prevent Flagstaff or any city from doing such a thing. From their story:

“The Arizona law was a test case for a strategy the natural gas sector is now deploying nationwide. Gas utilities, with help from industry trade groups, have successfully lobbied lawmakers over the past year to introduce similar ‘preemption’ legislation in 12 mostly Republican-controlled state legislatures, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC).

“The speed and scale of the strategy show just how high the stakes are for the gas industry. According to internal reports and hundreds of recent emails obtained through public records requests and shared with NPR, the gas industry sees an existential threat in the efforts of cities, states, businesses — and now the Biden administration — to sharply reduce fossil fuel use.”

They are, of course, defending their business and their livelihood. But they are also putting other lives at risk. According to the World Bank:

“FSM [Federated States of Micronesia] is particularly vulnerable to climate change and likely to suffer serious, adverse environmental, social and economic consequences. Indeed, it is already suffering from negative impacts associated with climate change, (e.g. saltwater intrusion from rising sea-levels damaging crops and freshwater supplies, increase in extreme weather events). Limited infrastructure, geographic remoteness and dependence on US aid exacerbate the country's vulnerability. FSM is particularly vulnerable to sea-level rise and an increase in extreme weather events such as storm surges given that the majority of its population, infrastructure and cultural sites are based in coastal areas. Furthermore, it is vulnerable to long dry spells resulting from El Niño South Oscillation (ENSO).”

Natural gas flames in Arizona are threatening fresh water in Micronesia.

I wish this were the only example, but I only have to visit the nearby state of Texas. The electric grid crisis after their major snowfall two weeks ago was not the result of wind turbines freezing. It turns out that the bulk of the grid's power loss came from freezing natural gas fittings. It also turns out that Texas had refused to connect their power grid to a national program that would have assisted in the event of failures. Why? Because it required that their equipment be prepared for grid-threatening events like, say, a major snowstorm. In states like Iowa the wind turbines turn in snowstorms, and the gas fittings stay open.

The reduced costs and increased profits enjoyed by the utility companies' investors cost enormous suffering and actual human lives.

Equally stunning, residents are being hit with colossal electric bills from utilities that failed to serve them.

Marilyn Salmon writes at Working Preacher, “According to Mark’s gospel, the disciples represent human values. They aspire to power and greatness and assume that Jesus shares these values. Jesus represents God’s values, best summed up by the willingness to risk one’s own life for the sake of others. Jesus does not encourage suffering for its own sake, nor does he recommend acceptance of forced servitude. The key to meaning here is ‘for the sake of the gospel’ and Jesus is the exemplary model. Jesus invites his disciples to follow his example, to be willing to risk our lives for the sake of others.”

The simple truth is that the way of power and greatness and wealth may lead to dominion, but they also lead to disaster. They lead to lead-poisoned water in Flint, Michigan, and the uninhabitable islands of Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. They lead to the Capitol insurrection of January 6<sup>th</sup> and to half a million Americans dead of COVID-19. They lead to coastal erosion around these islands and crop failures around the world.

It sounds like a strange covenant, doesn’t it, to lose our lives for Jesus’ sake and for the gospel? The curious thing is, living our lives with full awareness of others, and with care for the impact we have on the rest of the planet, may be the only way to save them – and ourselves.

Amen.