



Eye on the Sparrow

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

When I graduated from Horace Mann High School in 1963, I was entirely unaware of an environmental controversy swirling around in scientific and literary circles. Growing up on a farm in northern Wisconsin, I had always taken for granted the annual parade of big trucks grinding their engines into the fields to spray wide swaths of the insecticide DDT. Insects were bad. Chemicals were good. Big corporations were trustworthy. We looked to them for guidance. But a feisty woman and groundbreaking book changed all that.

That Rachel Carson's concern for birds—and nature in general—would set in motion an environmental revolution is remarkable. Like me, she was raised on a small farm—hers in Pennsylvania. Like me, she had an older brother and sister—and a mother who were awed by the wonders of nature. Like me, she loved to be out in the woods and fields and to be walking along the streams and searching ponds for teeming life.

She lived a generation before I did, and she turned her fascination with the outdoors into words that would echo around the world. Drawing from her own educational background and her work as a biologist working for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, she wrote an article entitled "Helping Your Child to Wonder" which was later turned into a book—*The Sense of Wonder*.

She recognized that there was a window of time to capture a child's imagination. Formal education was rigid. It ran roughshod over the natural childlike "clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring." Parents, she insisted, must stay the course. They had the wherewithal to keep alive that "excitement and mystery of the world we live in." Her own sense of wonder also prompted her to write poetry—a scientist and poet combined.

But even more than *The Sense of Wonder* and other best-selling works, it was *Silent Spring* that lit the fuse for environmentalism. First published in 1962, the book challenged President Kennedy to look into the grave concerns she raised. But chemical-company opponents struck back with a vengeance. Indeed, a parody was published suggesting that her warning about the use of DDT was merely Doomsday fear mongering.

As a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection, however, her message could not be stifled. Initially serialized in *The New Yorker*, the volume soon made the *New York Times* best-seller list where it remained for weeks on end. The most memorable chapter of the book is entitled "A Fable for Tomorrow." It imagines small-town America where blossoms are no longer in bloom, birds are not singing and babies are not happy and healthy.

The writing of the book was spurred by a letter from a woman who had noticed a decrease in the number of birds after spraying of DDT. Carson's worst fears were realized when she began documenting thinner eggshells with a corresponding decrease in eggs that hatched. DDT was also killing good insects along with the bad. These smallest of creatures along with birds needed someone's tender mercies, and Rachel Carson came to their aid.

Though the word wasn't in vogue at the time, Carson was America's leading *environmentalist*. Environmentalism and faith have often been tied together. St. Fiace is the patron saint of gardening, and St. Francis loved the birds and the bunnies. As I contemplate that term, I think Jesus was an environmentalist of his day: *Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. But I say to you even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Indeed, not a sparrow falls to the ground without our Heavenly Father knowing* (see Luke 12).

If God cares about insignificant sparrows, so ought we to offer tender mercies to all creatures great and small. □

—Ruth A. Tucker

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