

One New Book for the Preacher

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Hope Ferdowsian, *Phoenix Zones: Where Strength Is Born and Resilience Lives* (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2018)

In the season of Pentecost, a preacher's attention may be readily drawn to the third article of the Nicene Creed, with its classic rendering of God the Holy Spirit as "the Lord, the giver of life." In reflecting on that theme in a world that often sees life "taken" rather than "given," "faded" rather than "flourishing," preachers may find a welcome conversation partner in *Phoenix Zones: Where Strength is Born and Resilience Lives*.

The very title suggests that this is a book with Pentecost themes of new life writ large. That is to say, if the ancient mythology of Phoenix rising from the ashes may rightly be imagined as echoing Christian confidence in the life-giving power of God's Spirit, then this book holds promise for the preacher in the season of Pentecost.

Yet ironically, the capacity of this slender volume to be joined to Pentecost hopefulness in the "giver of life" is grounded in its resolute look into the abyss of hopelessness. Sticking with the title's metaphor, we learn that the ashes from which Phoenix rises are true ashes, replete with genuine and incorrigible suffering. Writing about the deep vulnerability and suffering experienced by humans and animals who have endured abuse and torture around the world, Hope Ferdowsian discerns a possibility of resilience (and yes, new life) when certain key pillars are present. They include:

1. basic liberty and sovereignty,
2. commitment to love and tolerance,
3. promotion of justice and opportunity, and
4. belief in the dignity of each human and nonhuman animal.

Her close contact with people and animals who have experienced some of the worst violence to body and spirit imaginable, yet who have found themselves in zones that led toward resilience and flourishing, has enabled her to identify these principles as source of the Phoenix effect. And what is even more remarkable is her discovery of how the wounded animals and humans contribute to their mutual healing in environments imbued with such principles.

Ferdowsian's explorations detail these realities: the common beneficial effect of freedom from narrow confinement and abusive treatment on chimpanzees and humans alike; the way in which offering elephants and vulnerable people freedom of choice and a sense of agency heals both; the mutual relief from PTSD experienced by homeless veterans and rescued parrots sharing love and tolerance; a recognition that justice for abused youth encompasses the same for their companion animals; how providing concrete hope amid the effects of perennial war in the Congo can provide both girls and gorillas with a sense of life's possibilities; and the clear evidence that both pigs and people can overcome unimaginable abuse and deprivation when treated with dignity.

From the early pages of the book, the connection between the fate of humans and animals is clearly sounded. An opening vignette shows how Henry Berg, founder of the American Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), clearly saw how his concerns for preventing abuse of animals was inseparable from a concern for the same protection for abused children in New York City circa 1874. Further, and less happily, research is identified that shows that a history of animal abuse is one of the most significant risk factors in identifying who is likely to become an abuser of an intimate partner, child, or stranger.

This all can well lead preachers to ponder more closely how the “Lord and giver of life” should be grasped in our time. It will not be enough to focus on the well-being of humans for the simple reason of the inextricable link between human and animal well-being. *Phoenix Zones* provides a telling example when it describes how over the past three decades an increase in meat production at a rate ten times the population growth rate has had deleterious effects on humans and animals alike. Billions of animals have, under the aegis of factory farming, been deprived of their dignity and sovereignty; while meat-based diets for humans have sponsored diseases of obesity, cancer, heart disease, and diabetes; and while meat production has contributed to the spread of emerging or reemerging pathogens threatening the health of people and animals alike.

If Yuval Noah Harari’s *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* rests content with an account of how humanity has proven itself an “ecological serial killer,” *Phoenix Zones* has a higher ambition for the species. Ferdowsian asks plaintively, “What if we removed ourselves from the crown of creation? Could we then perhaps abandon our transgressions—not only against animals but also against one another?” (p. 133).

Thereby the volume widens the meaning of the life of which God the Holy Spirit is the Lord and giver.