

All Saints Sunday, November 3: Luke 6:20-31

by [Lawrence Wood](#) in the [October 30, 2013](#) issue

They are overhead even now, making a racket as they chant *Texas, Texas, Texas*. The high cold air brushes the tips of their wings. It's not a journey to make alone, so they stay in formation, each taking a turn as leader, honking encouragement to the leader, or drafting on the uplift created by the bird ahead. If one falls out of formation, it soon discovers the difficulty of flying without that help. They have so far to go, they need every advantage.

And it's time to go. Even a caged goose knows when it's time and will hop around the cage. Migratory birds fly astounding distances—demoiselle cranes fly over the Himalayas, Arctic terns fly from pole to pole. Snow geese fly from their breeding grounds on Baffin Island, above the Arctic Circle, to Eagle Lake, Texas, carrying within them a powerful sense of home.

No one has to explain to a goose about the cold or the miles or the hardship. It knows all about weal and woe.

When William Fiennes was a boy in England, he read Paul Gallico's haunting story "The Snow Goose." Perhaps because his father was a bird watcher, the story left a lasting impression. In his twenties, William suffered a severe illness that hospitalized him for three months. During the long convalescence, he dreamt of escape, adventure, of flying with the geese to the Arctic. William had never seen a snow goose.

Once he was well enough to go, he set out on a quest to follow the geese on their 3,000-mile journey from Texas to Nebraska's Platte River valley, to the lakes of the Dakotas, to grain fields west of Winnipeg, to Hudson Bay, then to Baffin Island. He arrived in Aberdeen, South Dakota, the same day as 340,000 geese. The sound was deafening, as if their wing beats and calls were being hammered out on anvils.

If we've spent too much time indoors, we may not be able to properly appreciate the reading of the blessings and woes as given in Luke. We're more comfortable with the Beatitudes in Matthew. But as Jesus said, it rains on the just and the unjust. The God of the Hebrew Bible declares, "I form light and create darkness, I make weal

and create woe; I the Lord do all these things” (Isa. 45:7). We are not so different from our fellow creatures, and All Saints’ Sunday tells us that we too can survive hardship.

All Saints’ is a time of mixed emotions—a time of grief and gratitude, of blessing and woe. We can imagine standing beside the disciples on a broad plain, surrounded by a vast throng, wondering what will come next. Like them, we are ordinary people, prone to foolishness—stubbornly earthbound creatures. If we travel with Jesus we are going to see even greater extremes than we have known before. So it’s reassuring when he emphasizes the blessings. “Blessed are you who weep now,” he says. But we will have to venture a long way into places we haven’t seen before.

This is the time of year that many retirees from northern Michigan, who call themselves “snowbirds,” begin making their way to warmer climes. They have aches and pains and are well accustomed to loss. Every year they lose a friend or family member. It’s just a fact, and it doesn’t help to brood about it.

I got a call from an older friend who was on his way to Bradenton, Florida. He hates to fly—he feels more in control driving his own car. Except that on this trip he wrecked his car on the Blue Ridge Parkway. “Damn foolishness,” he says. “I was trying to turn off at one of those little rest stops, you know, where they have these little entrances . . .” At least he still continued on to Bradenton, where he looked forward to seeing his church friends. “We’re all safer when we get there,” he says. “This is the time when we make everybody nervous.”

As William Fiennes followed the geese across North America, he became nostalgic for his own boyhood home. At last the flock reached Baffin Island, above the Arctic Circle, where it was endless day. The geese have a wide habitat for nesting, with no predators, and they can feed 24 hours a day in sunlight.

Sharing the journey with them had been a sort of religious experience for William. He found human company way up there, a community of native Inuit people who live in prefab wooden homes with tiny windows and sealskins drying on their porches—and a nearby church shaped like an igloo. Natsiq and Paula, his hosts, volunteered to take him out on the tundra in their snowmobiles. They wore parkas stuffed with the down of snow geese. And on the frozen plain, surrounded by the birds, Natsiq and Paula urged him to join in a bowl of goose soup. It was like a kind of communion: “The meat was rich,” he says. “You could taste the miles in it.”

There were snow geese all around him: snow geese on the frozen plains, snow geese in the parka he wore, snow geese inside of him.

Men and women with snow-white hair are also getting where they need to go and finding the company and the home that they need. All of us on this All Saints' Sunday can be conscious of the loved ones around us, outside and inside us. When we think of them, it may be hard to say whether home is up there or down here. This is true whether we mount up with wings like eagles or on something decidedly more modest.