

What Animals Can Teach Us  
Psalm 104:10-25; Matthew 6:25-33  
October 11, 2020

Today we are focusing on the meaning of God's creatures in our lives and in our world. We thank God for our pets, and for creatures great and small. It is a day to be more aware of the animals with whom we share the planet and maybe even our homes and hearts.

Today we are going to share a few lessons that animals have to offer, and some biblical insights into what they can teach us about the Creator who redeems and sustains us. But today I invite all of us, whether we are dog people or cat people or horse people or not pet people at all, to reflect on God's creatures.

Genesis reminds us that creation was orderly. It builds each day. Animals are created by God and humans are to have dominion, care and stewardship for creatures and all of creation. We can see God's handiwork in animals and people of every size, shape and color.

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Jesus' own life and ministry was woven with the thread of lessons learned from animals. Think of the night of Jesus' birth. He was born in a manger -- a common part of the house where the animals stayed and was used as a feeding trough. It is the place where you would keep your cows and donkeys or a horse! He was welcomed and kept warm on a chilly winter's night by the animals who seemed to know that this was no ordinary moment.

In our NT lesson, Jesus taught about trusting God and not worrying about tomorrow.

*26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?  
27 Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?*

Jesus included animals as a way to illustrate who he was. He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey – a lowly beast of burden instead of a camel as the Passover feast was beginning. Not what people were expecting. And as he contemplated the end and the purpose for which he came, Jesus described his own identity as "the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world."

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The Bible gives us a vision of a Messianic age in which animals will reveal to us the nature of God's love. In Isaiah 11, we hear the prophet give voice to a future transformation where animals help lead the way. Isaiah writes:

'Then the wolf will live with the lamb,  
and the leopard lie down with the kid;...  
The cow and the bear will be friends,...  
and the lion will eat straw like cattle.'

What we have here is a vision for the new peaceable kingdom of the coming age - when the wolf will live with the lamb and the cow and the bear will be friends. What an amazing hope for justice and universal peace - so that not only will our human conflicts and struggles be resolved, but even the ancient enmity of the wild beasts and all of creation will be transformed. Animals have much to teach us about God, about our world, and about ourselves.

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One Christian who understood this deep connection with animals was Saint Francis of Assisi. He was a lover of life and creation. He knew about God and animals. He knew that God's power permeates all of life. Francis saw God reflected in children, the rich and poor. He saw God in kings and serfs, birds and wolves. As he began to realize the real intent of Christ's message to build the church, he turned his attention to ministering to the outcasts of society, and in particular to lepers.

He visited hospitals, ministering to the sick and dying. He preached the Word of God in the streets of Assisi and cared for others, though often had to beg for a living. He believed everyone and everything was his sister and brother. Francis had an affinity for all of God's creation. He noticed that animals were drawn to him. Legend has it that Francis spoke to a wolf, and stopped the wolf from attacking a village. He offered a sermon to the birds, and they stopped and listened. Francis knew that animals had much to teach humans about God, life and love. He watched the way they interacted with their world, and learned from them. He saw in them faithfulness.

There are countless stories from the Middle Ages and earlier about holy people and animals. In the Old Testament, we hear the story about Daniel in the lions den. They refused to harm him, but instead laid down like kittens to have their bellies rubbed. Did they have a spark of the divine instilled in them? Somehow they knew.

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Another influential Christian writer who understood the divine nature of animals was Pelagius. Pelagius lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, and influenced Christian doctrine. He wrote remarkably about animals in his letters:

*“Everywhere, narrow shafts of divine light pierce the thin veil that separates heaven from earth.” Look at the animals roaming the forest: God’s spirit dwells with them. Look at the birds flying across the sky: God’s spirit dwells within them. Look at the tiny insects crawling in the grass: God’s spirit dwells within them. Look at the fish in the river and the sea: God’s spirit dwells within them. There is no creature on earth in whom God is absent . . . When God pronounced that creation was good, it was not only that God’s hand had fashioned every creature . . . The presence of God’s spirit in all living things is what makes them beautiful; and if we look with God’s eyes, nothing on earth is ugly.” Pelagius – Letters p. 36*

Today we continue to value and give thanks for the pets in our lives. Pets come in all different shapes, sizes and species. I am mostly familiar with dogs. We have come to value them also for their service. They can offer comfort and care as guide dogs or therapy dogs.

Our son Joshua raised Elliott – a puppy in training for the Seeing Eye organization in New Jersey. He had him for 14 months, and during that time he learned social skills and basic commands. Today he is a proud Seeing Eye dog of a man who lives in Florida and travels the world.

As our companions, our furry pets have much to teach us about listening, openness, touch and sensitivity. Our pets enable us to touch, stroke, hug and hold without being ashamed or embarrassed. When in their company, we are often more free with our feelings than we are with other humans. They offer unconditional love. Many pets have a deep sensitivity to our feelings. I have met both canine and feline friends who can enter a room and know instinctively if someone is depressed, sad or ill. I have been in nursing homes who have an institutional cat or dog as a permanent resident.

On a personal note, I have been a dog lover for many years. When I met my wife in Indiana, I was the proud owner of *four* dogs! Four mind you! She said, “It’s either the dogs or me!” But after a few weeks, she knew I was not going to relent. We learned the art of compromise. She was not thrilled that she had competition for my affections!

Slowly by attrition, the number of dogs got down to one, and what a special dog she was. She was a Golden Retriever, and her name was, well, “Golden.” How original! I had so many dogs I was running out of names.

I found Golden as a stray on the streets of Rockford Illinois in the early 80's. She seemed old at the time, but I had her for another ten years. As time went on, she grew sick, and we knew the end was near. She struggled, but had the will to live until the day we brought Jackson home from the hospital. She was waiting to greet the newborn. She weakly lifted her head, sniffed the baby, then crossed the rainbow bridge.

Then, 15 years later -- just when you think you can't give your heart and love to another pet as much or as completely, it happened again --we got another golden retriever from a rescue site. His name was Chase. We were overjoyed to have a rescue dog, but it wasn't long until we realized that he was the one who rescued us, and allowed us to experience his joy and unconditional love.

Sadly, three years ago, he suddenly died. I have many lasting memories of Chase and his remarkable acts of devotion. Every time I looked into his eyes, I could see unconditional love.

Not long after Chase crossed the rainbow bridge, we got Sophia, our current golden retriever. The name Sophia means "wisdom." I saw Sophia on a rescue site, and it felt like God's wisdom whispering, "She's the one!" We rescued her three years ago from Puerto Rico, just before the terrible storms struck. My dogs have taught me a lot about unconditional love, and some of you have told me the same thing.

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God also loves us unconditionally, and sometimes I think God gave us pets that we might experience that same quality of love, and perhaps even learn something of the kingdom of God. There is an even greater love sent from the Creator in the person of Jesus Christ.

*Jesus said, "Not one sparrow will fall to the ground outside God's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. Matthew 10:29-3"*

As that wonderful old hymn puts it, "His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches over me." So let us give thanks today for our pets, and the one who blessed the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, and still blesses us today.

Amen

## Psalm 104:10-25

- <sup>10</sup> You make springs pour water into the ravines;  
it flows between the mountains.
- <sup>11</sup> They give water to all the beasts of the field;  
the wild donkeys quench their thirst.
- <sup>12</sup> The birds of the sky nest by the waters;  
they sing among the branches.
- <sup>13</sup> God waters the mountains from the upper chambers;  
the land is satisfied by the fruit of God's work,
- <sup>14</sup> and makes grass grow for the cattle,  
and plants for people to cultivate—  
bringing forth food from the earth:
- <sup>15</sup> wine that gladdens human hearts,  
oil to make their faces shine,  
and bread that sustains their hearts.
- <sup>16</sup> The trees of the LORD are well watered,  
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
- <sup>17</sup> There the birds make their nests;  
the stork has its home in the junipers.
- <sup>18</sup> The high mountains belong to the wild goats;  
the crags are a refuge for the hyrax.
- <sup>19</sup> You made the moon to mark the seasons,  
and the sun knows when to go down.
- <sup>20</sup> You bring darkness, it becomes night,  
and all the beasts of the forest prowl.
- <sup>21</sup> The lions roar for their prey  
and seek their food from God.
- <sup>22</sup> The sun rises, and they steal away;  
they return and lie down in their dens.
- <sup>23</sup> Then people go out to their work,  
to their labor until evening.
- <sup>24</sup> How many are your works, LORD!  
In wisdom you made them all;  
the earth is full of your creatures.
- <sup>25</sup> There is the sea, vast and spacious,  
teeming with creatures beyond number—  
living things both large and small.

## Matthew 6:25-33

25 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet God feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life ? 28 "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. 29 Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. 30 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will God not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? 31 So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' 32 For the pagans run after all these things, and God knows that you need them. 33 But seek first his kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.