

Sermon: St. Francis Day
Job 39:1–18
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St. Luke's ~ San Lucas Episcopal Church
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Today we celebrate the Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of Italy and the founder of the Franciscan order in the thirteenth century.

What is interesting to note is that when many of us think about Saint Francis, we immediately think about animals. Right? We see statues of Saint Francis surrounded by birds in many gardens, and we remember the stories and illustrations of him preaching to the birds and his special love for all creation.

And that is why, on this day, many churches, especially in our Episcopal Church, have the beautiful tradition of blessing the animals. We bring our dogs, our cats, and other beloved animals, and we ask God to bless them.

But today I want us to think about something a little different. We bless our animals because they are part of God's beautiful creation, but today I also want us to recognize that we are blessed because these animals are part of our lives.

Our first reading today from the Book of Job gives us a beautiful picture of God's relationship with creation and with the animals. God asks Job, "Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?" God speaks about the wild donkey running freely in the wilderness, the wild ox in all its strength, and the ostrich spreading its wings and running across the earth.

What I find fascinating about this passage is that God knows all these animals, and God watches over them.

Perhaps God is reminding Job, and in a way reminding us, that creation belongs to God. We are part of that creation, not separate from it. We share this world with all of God's creatures, and our lives are interconnected with theirs.

I think Saint Francis understood this very well. When Francis looked at the animals around him, he saw more than beautiful creatures. He saw fellow creatures of God, creatures that could teach us something about life and about the love of God.

He called the sun his brother and the moon his sister. And according to one of the most famous stories about Francis, he even preached a sermon to the birds. ("Fioretti")

Francis understood something very simple and very powerful: God loves what God has created. And I also believe that the animals that are part of our lives can teach us something about that love.

And when I think about this, I think about my dog, Bella. Bella is a little Toy Poodle who has become a very special part of our family. But Bella's story did not begin with us. Her story began on the streets of Mexico.

Bella is a rescue dog.

One day, my sister was sitting in a park in Mexico when Bella approached her. Bella was dirty, hungry, and apparently had been living on the streets for too long . And my sister saw her.

My sister could have ignored her or simply walked away. But she didn't. She interacted with Bella, gained her trust, picked her up, and took her to a veterinarian. She made sure Bella received the care she needed, and in doing so, she indirectly gave Bella another opportunity in life.

What my sister didn't know at that moment was that this little dog who approached her in the park would eventually become part of our family and would bring so many blessings in our lives. Through the years, Bella has blessed all of us. This little dog who was once dirty, hungry, and alone on the streets has brought so much love and joy into our family.

Those of you who have a dog, a cat, or another animal that you love probably understand what I mean. They become part of the rhythm of our lives. They are there in the morning. They are there when we come home. They sit with us. They walk with us. They know when something is not right. And sometimes, without saying a single word, they seem to know when we need them the most.

There is something very special about the way animals love us.

There is something very powerful about that kind of love. Human relationships can sometimes be complicated. We can disappoint or misunderstand one another. But animals love us in a much simpler way. They don't care about our successes or failures; they simply want to be with us. And perhaps through that unconditional love, they remind us of something about the love of God.

Bella cannot tell me anything about God with words, but perhaps she doesn't need to. Through her presence, her loyalty, her trust, and especially her unconditional love, she teaches me something that sometimes is difficult for us human beings to understand: what it means to love without expecting anything in return.

And perhaps this is one of the blessings that God gives us through the animals that become part of our lives. They remind us that love does not always need words. Sometimes love is simply being present. Sometimes love is sitting beside someone. Sometimes love is waiting at the door. Sometimes love is being excited just because someone you love has come home.

So, I wonder if sometimes our animals understand this better than we do.

We are the ones who feed them. We give them water. We take them to the veterinarian. We give them a place to sleep. We walk them and care for them, and because of that, we naturally think that we are the ones blessing them.

But after all these years with Bella, I am not so sure.

Yes, my sister rescued Bella from the streets of Mexico. She gave Bella another opportunity in life. But Bella has given something back to us as well. She has given our family years of companionship, joy, loyalty, presence, and unconditional love.

The blessing goes both ways.

And perhaps that is something Saint Francis understood when he looked at the animals around him. He did not simply see creatures that needed something from him. He saw creatures through whom he could also encounter something of God.

Maybe that is what we are invited to do today.

Look at the animals that have become part of your life. Think about the animals you have loved through the years, including perhaps some that are no longer with you. Think about the joy they brought into your home, the companionship they gave you, the difficult moments when they simply stayed beside you, and the unconditional love they gave you without asking anything in return.

Perhaps through them, we have experienced one of the many ways God reminds us that we are loved.

And maybe this is why losing an animal that has been part of our lives can hurt so much. We are not simply losing a pet. We are saying goodbye to a companion who has walked with us through part of our lives, a creature who has been present in our homes and in our families and who has given us love in a very simple and beautiful way.

So today, when we bring our animals forward and ask God to bless them, perhaps we should remember that we have already been blessed by them.

We bless the dog who has been waiting for us at the door, but that dog has already blessed us with companionship. We bless the cat who sits quietly beside us, but that cat has already blessed us with presence. We bless these animals because they are part of God's beautiful creation, but we also give thanks because God has allowed them to become part of our lives.

Yes, Bella has truly blessed our lives.

And through her unconditional love, Bella continues to remind me of the unconditional love of God.

So perhaps today, as we celebrate Saint Francis and bless our animals, we can also say:

Thank you, God, for the animals who bless our lives.

Thank you for their companionship. Thank you for their presence. Thank you for their joy.
Thank you for their unconditional love.

And thank you for the ways that, through them, we can learn a little more about your love for us.

Amen.

A Note from the Preacher

Because sermons are meant to be preached and therefore prepared with emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., they are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.