

All Creatures Great and Small

In the first week of October we recognize the life of St. Francis of Assisi. In doing this we often direct our eyes and our ears to see, listen, and indeed apprehend God in the gift of our animal companions. Saint Francis was among those who believe that the special relationships we have with animals is a part of how we experience God. I hope to reboot a Blessing of the Animals service next year, but in the meantime, I offer a reflection on what St. Francis taught us. It is meet and right to take time to give God thanks for all the ways that companion animals and even wild animals enrich our lives and give us windows on God's wider creation! And for many people, the bond we share with the animals in our lives is very strong and enduring. We forget just the very special place animals occupy in the Biblical account of God's creative activity, and that animals are included in God's hope for the future of peace and harmony. Methodist founder John Wesley insisted that animals will attain heaven. He maintained that in what he called the "general deliverance" from the world's pervasive wrongs and cruelties, animals would be given "vigor, strength and swiftness...to a far higher degree than they ever enjoyed." And of course, we have Francis. Francis called animals "brothers" and "sisters" and even preached to them! And Albert Schweitzer said, "To the truly ethical man, all life is sacred, including life regarded by some as "less than ours." Scripture issues a meaningful call to move beyond ourselves and into God's hope for the beauty and purpose of the natural world. In the book of Genesis, we see that with delight, God proclaims the goodness of creation. Genesis also tells us that we are created in the image of God. When we say we are created "in the image of God" we mean that all that is best and whole and loving and creative in God is the very seed out of which we grow. It means that we have the ability, should we choose to claim and nurture it, to love and care for the whole creation the same way that God does. Our care of the world around us is meant to reflect the fullness of the ways God loves us. We are meant to understand that being given "dominion" over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth means we will care for creation in the same way that God has dominion and care over humankind. What we have long forgotten to mirror is that God's practice of dominion is characterized by mercy, gentleness, compassion, and caretaking. We are meant to care for creation the way that God cares for us. Just as God desires our wholeness and joy we were meant to offer the land and the creatures of the land, the sea, and the air this same chance to flourish and be nurtured by a loving hand. Sacred story tells us that animals are created and important to God in their own right. Respecting animals is a sign of humility and respect on our part and an admission that humans are not the center of everything. Moreover, the animals many of us have are our companions. They are part of our lives, they share our homes, and the more science and study advances we learn that many even share our joys and sorrows. Because they are our companions, our friends, we are reminded that friends are not there to be used or easily forgotten or discarded when they grow old or somehow inconvenient. The companionship of animals is yet another of God's gracious gifts and a sign of God's care for us. And many depend on their livelihoods from animals. So even beyond the companionship we share with our beloved creatures we also give thanks for the many ways that animals both give and sustain life for many. We should never forget the multitude of ways that animals bless our lives in ways great and small. I'll end with a prayer of thanksgiving for the creatures that share our lives. Loving God, remind us always that we are created in your image, the image of a loving and compassionate God. In this image we are called to care for your creation. Open our hearts and minds to the lessons we may learn from our companions---to live fully in the present; to love without judgment; to face each day anticipating joy. Help us, we pray, to do your will on earth, so that you may look upon our care of your creation and declare it good.

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+