

## **"Blessing of the Animals" St. Francis of Assisi**

Psalm 104

"At your Word, the waters divided, becoming rivers and lakes and mighty oceans; storms came to ensure the balance and to renew the earth. The mountains rose, the valleys became low in the places that You did appoint. You brought harmony to all the earth, that life might spring forth in abundance. You created springs to flow into the valleys; they flow between the hills. Giving drink to every creature of the field, quenching their thirst as your Living Water quenches ours. With the air, You have given birds their habitation; they sing among the branches. The majesty of Creation is seen throughout the land, the sounds of Creation mingle with the music of the spheres. Through your Word, grass came forth for the cattle, and plants for us to cultivate, That we might have food from the earth, and wine, the fruit of the vine, Oil and healing herbs of many varieties, and bread, our daily sustenance. The trees are watered abundantly and with the sun, provide the air we breathe. Every living creature has its home: the birds nest in trees, the wild goats upon the mountaintop; even the rocks provide protection. You created the moon to mark the tides and seasons, the sun, that rises and sets in beauty. In darkness, when night comes, the creatures of the forest roam the earth. They eat their fill, each according to their need; You provide their food. When the sun rises, they disappear from sight and lie sown in their dens. As your people go forth to their work, You are there to guide them O You, who know all hearts, how manifold are your works! In wisdom You have created them all; the earth is filled with your creatures."

'Apprehend God in all things, for God is in all things. Every single creature is full of God, and is a book about God. Every creature is a word of God. If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature even a caterpillar, I would never have to prepare a sermon so full of God is every creature '

(Meister Eckhart, a 13th century Christian mystic)

Some say he was a rich, privileged youth, who ran with a wild crowd. His family had money, and he was not afraid of tapping those resources to support his life of privilege and extravagance. Perhaps that is why he was well loved by those who hung out with him.

The name given to him at his baptism by his mother was Giovanni, but his father not liking the name, renamed him Francesco.

Francesco's "exuberant love of life and a general spirit of worldliness made him a recognized leader of the young men of the town."

He joined the military, fighting in the war between Assisi and Perugia. He was taken prisoner, and upon his release, became seriously ill.

Upon his recovery, he began to have visions, of God calling him to a new life of service. In an amazing moment, he renounced all worldly possessions, stripping off his clothes made of the finest material, piling them before his own father, who was a wealthy cloth merchant, and devoted his life to living in poverty and service to the poor.

This rich, young man became known as the “poor, little man”.

Francesco or Francis, was, “for a time, considered to be a religious fanatic, begging from door to door when he could not get money for his work, evoking sadness or disgust to the hearts of his former friends, ridicule from the unthinking.” (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Francis-of-Assisi/The-Franciscan-rule>)

In addition to serving the poor, “Francis considered all nature as the mirror of God and as so many steps to God. He called all creatures his “brothers” and “sisters,” and, in the most endearing stories about him, preached to the birds and persuaded a wolf to stop attacking the people of the town of Gubbio and their livestock if the townspeople agreed to feed the wolf.” (<https://www.franciscanmedia.org/saint-of-the-day/saint-francis-of-assisi>)

Giovanni Francesco of Italy is best known today as St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals and environment. Some say Francis was the original Earth Day advocate.

His “devotion to God was expressed through his love for all of God's creation. St. Francis cared for the poor and sick, he preached sermons to animals and praised all creatures as brothers and sisters under God. ”

According to The Humane Society of America: “His dedication to poverty, humility, obedience, patience and compassion soon attracted followers and, in 1209, he received permission from Pope Innocent III to form a new religious order known as the Friars Minor (commonly called the Franciscans).

“Francis' deep love of God overflowed into love for all God's creatures—expressed not only in his tender care of lepers and his (unsuccessful) attempt to negotiate peace between Muslims and Christians during the fifth Crusade, but also in his prayers of thanksgiving for creation, his sermons preached to animals and his insistence that all creatures are brothers and sisters under God.” ( <https://www.humanesociety.org/resources/st-francis-assisi>)

The Feast of St. Francis is celebrated on October 4. As a part of the celebration of many churches around the United States, and world, have begun to offer a “Blessing of the Animals” during worship or following worship. “Although blessings of various animals took place in different times and places, and for varying reasons, throughout Christian history, the growth of these rituals beginning in the late twentieth century is dramatic [...] By the early twenty-first century, hundreds, if not thousands, of these blessings take place annually.”

Here in Cambridge, our clergy group have participated in three community "Blessing of the Animals" events. Our first was at Grace Lutheran when rain forced us inside; the second was as a part of Barktober Fest, and the third was a held in Veterans Park.

As I have shared, it is a chance for people to bring their pets (or farm animals), or pictures of their pets or some item that represents them, and to receive a blessing.

This year, I decided to invite us into this annual ritual, since we were going to be outside in the parking lot anyway. I know many of you have pets - dogs and cats, who are part of your family. We have had many conversations about our pets. I know you love them, and value them, and have, like me, grieved their deaths.

Anatole France said: "Until one has loved an animal, a part of one's soul remains unawakened."

Anatole's words remind me of the love not just for our pets, but for the farm animals raised by the youth in 4-H. I have over the years, stopped by the Stoughton 4-H fair to walk through the barns, visiting with our youth who were showing their pigs, dairy cows, chickens and rabbits. You can see the love and care they have for these animals who they have grown close too as they raise them, often from birth. We want to bless their animals, who most of them name, and the youth who raise them.

We also want to bless you who have open your hearts and homes to rescue a pet. Julie Anderson has been actively involved with Paddy's Paws and other recuse groups. If you haven't had a chance to meet "Biggie," you should.

Mare has her beloved cat, who is her constant companion and trouble-maker, as all cats can be at times.

Staci, Sam and I have had four Australian Shepherds (now called American Shepherds as they are an American breed) - Molly, Beckett, Shadow and now, Sunday. Shadow was my constant companion. He is the reason I started my Meditations in the Meadow. He was often here, helping Sam and me film worship during 2020. I did not know I could love a dog so much. When his health declined, and we had to make that very difficult decision to have him euthanized, I sobbed. As I held his paw, I looked him the eyes, eyes that had offered me/us so much love, and thanked him for that gift, and for blessing us.

While I was still grieving, and not sure I was ready for another dog, Staci and Sam convinced me otherwise. And now, we have Sunday. He will turn 2 years old this coming week. I really wanted to bring him so I could introduce him to you, but leading worship and handling a dog by myself would not have been a wise decision, so a picture will have to do.

I know some of you have pets or have had them over your lifetime. I would love to have you share with us their name(s), type of pet, and if you are reading this at home, to share with me via an email or text, a picture and maybe a memory or story you have of them.

In a moment, we will share in the liturgy for the Blessing of the Animals. Whether we have one or two, or an ark full, we will offer our words with love and a full-heart, mindful of our calling, like St. Francis, to care for all of God's creatures, great and small.

"The Canticle of Brother Sun" by Francis of Assisi:

Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,  
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor, and all blessing.  
To You alone, Most High, do they belong,  
and no man is worthy to mention Your name.  
Praised be You, my Lord, with all your creatures,  
especially Sir Brother Sun,  
Who is the day and through whom You give us light.  
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor;  
and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,  
in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,  
and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather  
through which You give sustenance to Your creatures.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,  
which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,  
through whom You light the night  
and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,  
who sustains and governs us,  
and who produces varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon for Your love  
and bear infirmity and tribulation.  
Blessed are those who endure in peace  
for by You, Most High, they shall be crowned.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,  
from whom no living man can escape.  
Woe to those who die in mortal sin.  
Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will,  
for the second death shall do them no harm.  
Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks  
and serve Him with great humility.

Amen.