

“Do Dogs Go to Heaven?”

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Text: Genesis 8:13-19

Community Christian Church

Kansas City, Missouri

“Blessing of the Animals” Sunday, October 3, 2010 – 10:45 a.m.

Everybody has heard the story of Noah’s Ark. But did you know that the Bible itself is a veritable ark populated by intriguing animals and compelling creatures? Furry, fuzzy, feathery critters team in the pages of Holy Writ.

Who could ever forget Jonah’s “great fish” (what we stereotypically call a “whale”) and how it regurgitated Jonah up toward the salvation of the Ninevites and his very own life. ¹

Cowardly Aaron manages to make a bogus claim in the creaturely realm when directs the fearfully wayward Israelites to fashion a golden calf to worship. ²

Pharaoh’s frogs are an abominable curse upon the land of Egypt, surpassed only by the marauding locusts. ³

A ram saves Abraham from sacrificing his son Isaac. ⁴

Balaam’s ass, the talking donkey, addresses a reproofing word to Balaam and shows how God can speak through even seemingly dumb beasts of burdens. ⁵

One of Isaiah’s most powerful prophecies imagines a zoological miracle, when the lion and the lamb will lie down together in a peaceable kingdom. ⁶

One of our favorite images of Jesus is as “the good shepherd,”⁷ and you know that makes us very needful and well kept sheep.

Two of the most famous critters in the New Testament are the donkey upon whom Jesus rides triumphantly into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday⁸ and the cock who crows after the apostle Peter’s third denial of Jesus and thus signals Peter’s utter abandonment of the One he said he would never forsake.⁹

The Biblical picture is plentifully clear: animals in all their multitudinous variety and glorious kinds are infinitely special to God. They bear profound metaphorical and theological significance. Through them, God has communicated and will communicate the nature of His holy care for the world.

Before Noah, there was Adam. The reason for the flood in Noah's age is found in the violence and rebelliousness of the generations after Adam's age. Now the creation story is as true a story as there ever was, even if the facticity of it is doubtable. It is alarmingly unconscionable for so-called Christians to declare that the creation of the world took place just exactly as the first chapters of Genesis describe. The Bible is not an infallible, inerrant textbook of geology or botany or biology, but rather a very human attempt at interpreting the mood and meaning of God's presence in the world from time's onset.

From the beginning of the creation story in Genesis in the idyllic setting of Eden's Garden to the end of that ideal and the degradation of the world brought to its logical violent demise in the Great Flood to the commencement of the world's new beginning as depicted in our text this morning, God's will and steadfast love for the human family is paralleled by God's abiding love for the whole creaturely realm.

We too quickly forget this aspect of God's care and intention for the world. But we remember fast when a BP rig blows up in the Gulf of Mexico and a pipeline erupts and a Louisiana pelican soon thereafter pays the price with its life. Who could ever deny the despoiling of the goodness of creation when they have beheld the desecration of a pelican with an oily sheen on its befouled wings, thus rendering it basically flightless.¹⁰

We too easily forget the holy aspect of creation which was established at earth's beginnings when God pronounced it all "good."¹¹ But we recall it quickly when we're in Los Angeles and can taste the acrid tinge pollution in the skies. Or we're in Tennessee and see the obscene rush of coal ash in the rivers. Or we learn of the rapacious greed of the chicken king whose reckless practices regarding egg production set off an national outbreak of salmonella.

Biblically, theologically, and experientially, we know that Creation's treasurable holiness is without dispute.

In our text for the morning we witness the reason for our "Blessing of the Animals" emphasis in today's services. Now, to be sure, St. Francis is the historical figure who inspired the liturgical bless of our furry friends and all of their creaturely kin.

Today is the actual day of the 784th anniversary of his death. It was St. Francis who, in and around Assisi in Italy, began preaching to the birds and other animals in his backyard. It is St. Francis who became associated with the tender care of all creatures who have been placed under humanity's stewardship. It was St. Francis who is said to have invented the first "living nativity scene," complete with several critters from the barn.

But it is really Noah who preserves even the possibility of St. Francis' loving honoring of animals and our blessing of them.

The account of the Great Flood, is, of course, problematic. Never mind the parallel between other Middle Eastern religious histories and mythologies and what is found in Genesis. Questions beyond and more important than dates and the size of the Ark arise. How could a gracious God, the Creator of all that is, destroy everything of earth except for the magnificent menagerie placed in the Ark? What kind of deity is it who does something like that? And why didn't Noah speak up for the rest of the people other than his own family? And how many creatures could really fit into a vessel that was 300 cubits, and 50 cubits wide, and 30 cubits high? And "What's a cubit, anyway?," as Bill Cosby once famously asked. So Noah is righteous, as Genesis says. But he doesn't show much compassion for anyone beyond his family. Some commentators have cited this last fact about Noah as the reason behind Noah's secondary status among the patriarchs and Abraham's preeminence. Abraham may not have been as righteous as Noah, nor as good a boat-builder, and he certainly proved to have less backbone than Noah. But Abraham always had compassion and argued passionately on behalf of humanity and for its future.

Still, besides all these problems, the real thrust of the story is God's remembrance of "Noah *and* the animals." ¹² and the second-chance launching for the world and humanity.

While St. Francis provided the foundational liturgical reason for our celebration today, Noah and his Ark give us the overarching faith understanding of the importance of *all* of God's creation.

Some folks might respond at this point in the sermon with an indignant dismal: “I could have told you that! Of course, all animals are important.” And you would have been entirely correct in your passionate retort.

Beyond what we know with our heads about the scriptural and theological affirmations of the importance of animals, we also value them deep in our hearts. We treasure animals. We love animals. If the annual cost of pet food in the United States is any indication, we adore animals. Every caretaker of a dog, cat, parakeet, gerbil, and any other animal will testify to the sacredness of the creatures in their care. Animals in general and pets in particular offer a plethora of pleasures and a life’s worth of graces. The list is really endless: comfort, playfulness, loyalty, affection, companionship, love, and countless other gifts.

And we know in our hearts how God must feel about the fragile situation of the animals in the world and how bruisable God’s heart must be when God beholds how animals are mistreated, harmed or hurt. We can easily understand God’s declaration in Genesis when Creation was completed: “And God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”¹³

We also know with our hearts why God mandated that the embarkation include at least two sets of every kind of creature in Noah’s Ark. And how, too, God’s heart must have been gladdened to the point of bursting to see the parade of the disembarkation when “every animal, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out of the ark by families.”¹⁴

With heads full of knowledge and hearts full of compassionate feelings, we can now answer the question posed in today’s sermon title, “Do Dogs Go to Heaven?”

But before we do, hear the words to this song by Wendy Francisco:

*I look up and I see God.
I look down and see my dog.
Simple spelling G.O.D
Same words backwards D.O.G
They would stay with me all day.
I’m the one who walks away.
But both of them just wait for me
and dance at my return with glee.*

*Both love me no matter what
 Divine God and canine mutt.
 I take it hard each time I fail,
 but God forgives, dog wags his tail.
 God thought up and made the dog,
 dog reflects a part of God.
 I've seen love from both sides now,
 it's everywhere, amen, bow wow.
 I look up and I see God.
 I look down and see my dog.
 And in my human frailty
 I can't match their love for me.¹⁵*

Now we can sure answer the question “Do Dogs Go to Heaven?”

The answer to the question “Do Dogs Go to Heaven?” is surely “Yes,” even if no one can ever give a crystal clear description of the afterlife.

The answer is “Yes,” if we believe that God is the Lord of all creation, and as our Creator never neglects or rejects any of his creatures.

The answer must be “Yes,” if we believe that creatures who provide unstinting loyalty and undying fidelity to their caretakers should be accorded by their eternal Maker at least as much welcome and enduring affection as they provided their earthly masters.

The answer must be “Yes,” if we have a sense of the unwavering love of God and know that such love has been implanted in creatures high and low, far and wide, human and otherwise. There is no loss of love's power in the quantum physics of God's love. What emanates from God's love goes on in life, translated into precious memories and returns to the eternity of God's love.

With head and heart we can say “Yes” to the question of the morning. But not only that, we can also discover some new insights related to the sacred and eternally loved status of all of the creatures in God's natural world.

1 – Our fellow creatures treat us with the utmost devotion. How we treat them now in this life is equally as important as our expectations to abide with them in the afterlife. God will surely take care of our dogs and cats, donkeys and parrots, and other manner of critters. Our job is to know their sacredness here and now and be the best stewards we can be of their well-being.

2 – How treat our fellow creatures is a reflection of our faith, an extension of what we believe.

Now, as most of you know, I have been a dog lover. And the enmity I have expressed toward cats has been pretty consistent. Some might say, and I would agree, that I have been full of vitriol toward felines. But this morning I have a confession. After living in a house full of cats and getting to know Lizzie, Mac, Gus, and Cleo on an intimate basis, and after seeing them all come to the conclusion of their earthly lives, I have a much different attitude toward cats. If I am a Christian worthy of the name, my faith should be reflected in how I treat others, *all* others, including *all* creatures. For a good chunk of my journey, it has not been so. But over the years, I discovered that if faith is to be fully expressed, there was a need, indeed a mandate, to express loving regard even for cats. So there, I've confessed it. I invite you to join with me, the founding member of the "Former-Cat-Haters-Now-Cat-Lovers Club." We all need to grow toward being more and more consistent between what we say about faith with our mouth and how we express such faith in our regard toward all creatures.

3 – How we treat our fellow creatures can help us treat our brothers and sister human beings more humanely.

Would we ever yell epithets at a dog or a cat for the way they looked at us or because of the tone of their bark or the pitch of their meow? If we wouldn't do it to a dog or cat, why do we treat each other that way? Could we treat our neighbor at least as kindly as we do our pets? Could we care for the nutrition received by the children in our schools as much as we care for the diets of our dogs?

Eugene Peterson calls the disembarkation of Noah's Ark atop Ararat a "brimming prodigality of life."¹⁶ And that is exactly what animals reveal to us in all their glory, the "brimming prodigality of life." In our pets and in all members of the nonhuman creaturely realm God proffers us a glimpse of the divine and a reassurance of our own care. Our destinies are twined, our futures shall be shared, and we will leave the rest up to God.

Mary Oliver puts it this way in the title poem of her most recent book of poems, *Evidence*:

*There was someone I loved who grew old and ill.
One by one I watched the fires go out.
There was nothing I could do
except to remember
that we receive
then we give back.*¹⁷

If God remembered Noah and the animals, it's the least we can do to follow God's example. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1 Jonah 1:1-2:10
- 2 Exodus 32
- 3 Exodus 8 and 10
- 4 Genesis 22:9-14
- 5 Numbers 22:22-30
- 6 Isaiah 11:6-7
- 7 John 10:11
- 8 Matthew 21:1-11
- 9 Luke 22:31-34
- 10 *National Geographic*, October 2010, Vol. 218, No. 4, pp. 32-33, and the cover.
- 11 Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31
- 12 Genesis 8:1
- 13 Genesis 1:31
- 14 Genesis 8:19
- 15 At this point in the sermon, I invited Rev. Megan Ammann to come forward and sing "God and DoG," by Wendy Francisco, Crack of Noon Music, 2009. See www.WendyFrancisco.com.
- 16 Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs: NAV Press, 2002), p 31.
- 17 Mary Oliver, *Evidence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), p. 53.