

**A Sermon Preached at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Tacoma, WA
by The Reverend Martin Yabroff**

The Blessing of the Animals (in place of Proper 22)

October 3, 2010

Lessons: Genesis 9:8-17, Psalm 148, Luke 12:22-31

I would like this morning to remember three scenes, three stories. They are about Noah, Jesus, and Francis of Assisi.

The days of Noah had many similarities with our own. Many problems in the world. Great stress, fear, rumors of bad things to come. God called Noah to build an ark, to use his God-given skill and reason and technological abilities to build a way ahead, to sail ahead to a new, safer, better future. So Noah built an ark, and gathered his wife and children, and those who would come, and prepared to close the doors on the past.

But God said, "Wait a minute, Noah!" Humans shall not survive on their own. Our future is bound up with the future of all creatures – the birds and animals, orcas and insects, and the health of the environment. So Noah invited all God's creatures into the ark, because our survival is inter-dependent.

And after the flood waters had drained away, God affirmed God's covenant not only with humans but with "every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth". That covenant is with all the creatures here today – four-footed and two-footed,

Jesus' disciples and followers were often anxious and stressed, just like us. So Jesus told them, especially in such times as these, to look up from their troubles and consider the birds, the wild creatures, and the natural world around them. Lift up your eyes to the mountains; consider the seas that God has made; the flowers that God clothes in such bright or subtle colors. And pay attention to the animals, to pets and creatures around us. They don't seem as anxious as we are, and the love that our pets give us underscores God's grace for us all. We care for our pets, and they for us – that is what God's kingdom is about.

Francis of Assisi was born in Italy in the 12th century into a wealthy family, but came to let go of worldly wealth in order to live simply, in harmony with God and Nature.

He taught us about Christ's love and humility. He was such a gentle soul that the birds and wild animals supposedly gathered along with the people to hear him preach.

Francis is an expression of Celtic spirituality. He lived several centuries later, in Italy rather than the Atlantic isles. But the renewal spirit of Celtic Spirituality did not just upwell in the 4th-6th centuries in Scotland, Ireland and Wales. It stirs in various times, such as with Francis in the Middle Ages, and in ways today. Further, at the beginning of the seventh century, Columbanus, a great Celtic missionary, came down to Northern Italy to found a monastic community in Bobbio. We know that centuries later, Francis spent time in that monastery in Bobbio. So in various ways, Francis expresses Celtic spirituality, which we will explore further in our Celtic Faire later this month. For now, recognize that Francis as a Celtic spirit helps us to be attuned with Nature, and to focus on simplicity and Scripture.

Noah, Jesus and Francis teach us that caring for our pets, and their caring for us, is deeply spiritual. Indeed, having a pet is sacramental – it opens our hearts to the love of God. In caring for a pet, and in grieving for a pet who is no longer with us, our hearts are touched and opened and enlivened. Therefore, it is good to gather to thank God for our pets and to bless them and those who care for them.

Noah, Jesus and Francis also challenge us to both appreciate our environment and to care for it. How we use energy, and how we clean up and restore Puget Sound, are some of the key issues for us today.

In the Christian calendar, tomorrow is the Feast of St. Francis. It is an occasion to accept and celebrate and be thankful for “all creatures great and small”. It is time to re-dedicate ourselves as stewards and protectors of God's creation, the environment in all its wonder, which is in critical need of our care and restoration, using all our technological skill and insight. Let us care for all creatures, all creation, for God's sake - who made it all and trusts us to be good stewards – and for the sake of our peace and joy, now and for generations to come.

Amen.