

Sermon, 2-21-21, Brian Jones

Good morning. I'm glad to be with you this morning and happy to have the opportunity to preach. I get to do this from time to time. And so today, the first Sunday in Lent, I have the opportunity.

Let me pose a question. Do dogs and cats go to heaven?

I've heard this question often enough to take it seriously. People want to know if their beloved companions will be with them in the next adventure. It seems to pet owners unfair that their beloved animals should not attend them in the next life. But traditional Christian doctrine holds that humans have souls and animals do not, and therefore animals will not enjoy the life in the world to come. That is the dogmatic answer that I hear from time to time.

I have run into a lot of resistance to this longstanding dogma. People who live closely with non-human animals of all kinds, not just dogs and cats, but also horses and cows, sheep, goats, birds, etc., know them as, and I don't have a good word here, but they know them as *persons*.

Not as people, but as persons. Not as human persons, but as personal, as relational beings. And they *are* relational, we form relationships with them. We call them our companions. We depend on them for comfort and protection. We give them gifts. And they give back to us—affection, devotion and help of various kinds. We even have conversations with our animals. I've noticed that some people who live alone have extended conversations with their animals. They speak without words, but they speak, nonetheless. And we talk to them.

Now, why do I bring this up? This is the first Sunday in Lent, and it probably seems very strange to talk about pets and heaven, seems maybe a little off topic, but stay with me. I'm inspired to consider this topic today, the status of animals, because of our scripture readings. Did you notice animals in the readings?

Consider our reading from Genesis. The passage we read for today comes from the flood story. It's just after the flood has abated and God is speaking to Noah. Noah and

his son stand before God, and God makes a solemn promise, a covenant not to flood the earth again. This is the first covenant God makes in the Bible.

God announces several covenants after this one, and all of them are crucial to the unfolding story of God and humans. God subsequently makes a covenant with Abraham and his descendants, then with Moses and the Israelites, then with David and his descendants, and finally, in the New Testament, Jesus makes a new covenant with his disciples, with us, a covenant made in his own blood. But the covenant made after the flood is the first and most comprehensive covenant in the Bible. It is profoundly important, and we should pay attention to it.

So, what is the purpose of this first covenant God makes? At its center is, of course, the promise not to flood the earth again. No more floods. What I find remarkable about this covenant is that God announces that it is not between God and humans, but between God *and all living flesh*; between God, humans and every living creature that is with you—the birds, the domestic animals and every animal on the earth with you. The covenant God announces repeats this again and again. Well, listen to it. Listen to it again. Let me just read it emphasizing certain parts.

God says, as for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you -- the birds, the domestic animals and every animal of the earth with you as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.

God said, this is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you for all future generations. I have set my bow in the clouds and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the Earth. (That would be all of us, all creatures.)

When I bring the clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh, and the water shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh when the bow is in the clouds. I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the Earth.

God said to Noah, *this is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the Earth.*

Remarkable, isn't it? Six times in a very few verses God repeats that the Covenant is not with humans only, but with all the animals, with all flesh. This repetition, I do not think, is accidental or inconsequential. This kind of repetition in the Bible is a double underline. The point is emphatic. God considers the animals worthy to stand alongside humans as the recipients of a wonderful and solemn divine promise. To put it another way, God treats the animals as relational beings who are capable and worthy of receiving divine promises.

We should ponder this. This passage could justly be cited as the cornerstone of an ethic concerning non-human animals. And there are other places in the Bible that show that God values and relates in a personal way to non-human animals. Consider Jonah. You may remember this little story. It's a lot of fun. It has a big fish that swallows the reluctant prophet. It has cattle. It has a worm at the end. And each of these nonhuman creatures acts obediently. As God's call comes to them, they respond. When Nineveh repents, the cattle put on sackcloth and call out to God. I've always figured that was kind of a humorous element, because I'm not sure how sackcloth gets on animals. And it also says they didn't drink or eat. I'm not sure how you keep them from doing that, but the prophet emphasizes that Nineveh's repentance includes the cattle.

And the book ends with the words—these are the very last words in our English translations and in the Hebrew original—*and also many animals*. God is speaking and he says to Jonah, *Should I not care for Nineveh, a city of 100,000 people and also many animals?*...as if Jonah might miss the fact that animals are included in God's salvation. It is quite striking.

And consider the Book of Job. God's three-chapter long speech at the end of the book features 12 animals: lions, ravens, mountain goats, deer, oxen, donkeys, ostriches, horses and hawks are all mentioned. And the hippopotamus and the crocodile may also be present in God's joyous description of Behemoth and Leviathan. Each animal is a creature that God watches over, that God tends, that God delights in. And humans are hardly mentioned in that whole section of the book. God's evident pride in the catalogue of the wonderful animals that God has made is really quite amazing.

And there are other examples of God's care for the non-human animals in both the law and the prophets. A number of laws in the Pentateuch protect animals. In particular one of the Ten Commandments, the Sabbath commandment, says explicitly that we are to give animals rest on the Sabbath, not just human workers.

And the law of Moses specifies that slaughter of animals for food is a sacred act. You can't just do it in any context. The slaughter of animals in the Old Testament always takes place at an altar or a sanctuary. It's a sacred act. The killing of an animal for food is not to be done casually; it's to be done carefully, reverently. And their blood, which is holy, we are told early in the scriptures, must be returned to the ground. It may not be eaten, because God has given that life to the animal. And the life belongs to God.

Slaughter today as we practice it is far from holy. We have delegated it. It's a horrible process, as many of you know. It certainly does not respect the holiness of animals or acknowledge that they are beloved by God. Would it be too much to say that slaughter as practiced today is a sacrilege or a blasphemy?

Let me give you one more example of God's valuing of non-human animals. This is from Psalm 104.

*O, Lord, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great
There go the ships,
and Leviathan that you form to sport in it. (the word translated 'sport' is a word in Hebrew that means to play or goof around.)
These all look to you to give them food in due season;
when you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.*

This beautiful psalm declares that God cares for the non-human animals. God created them. God tends them. God rejoices in them. And most surprisingly of all, I think the Psalm says that the non-human animals have God's spirit in them.

They are animated by the divine breath. They are holy beings, just as humans are.
When you send forth your spirit, they are created.

What about the New Testament? Did you notice the animals in today's Gospel? It's the temptation of Jesus, not a story in which one would expect to find animals. But Mark tells us that Jesus is tended by angels in the wilderness and was *with the wild beasts*. No humans were with him, only angels and wild beasts. I have wondered which wild beasts these were. I am disappointed that we are not told. Were they hyenas? Lions?

More to the point, why are wild beasts mentioned at all? Is their presence merely color in the story, or is it a detail that we should ponder? It is so odd and unexpected to find wild beasts in this context that I think it must be an important detail. Whatever its meaning in the context, it shows that the wild beasts play an important role at this moment in sacred history.

While considering all this, let's return to the question of animals and the afterlife. Now, the Bible does not directly address the question, Will my dog or cat go to heaven? I think, however, that the dogmatic exclusion of animals from the afterlife is based less on the Bible than it is on our own human-centered way of thinking. There is at least one place in the Bible that portrays animals and humans together in the age to come. This is the 11th chapter of Isaiah. The Prophet says that when the Messiah rules the earth, *the wolf shall live with the lamb. The leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze. Their young shall lie down together. And the lion shall eat straw like the ox for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*

When the earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord, when the kingdom has come and the Messiah reigns, all of nature will be transformed, Isaiah says, and the animals will be there. Well, if goats, leopards, calves, lions, bears and oxen partake in the age to come, why shouldn't our own beloved pets?

There is a more serious question we must consider in light of God's valuing of non-human animals. It is this: what is our obligation to non-human animals? How should we think of them, how should we treat them?

Wendell Berry, in his essay "Christianity in the Survival of Creation," says this. *Creation is the continuous, constant participation of all creatures in the being of God. Creation is God's presence in creatures. We are holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy.*

And Barry goes on to say this, *our destruction of nature is a most horrid blasphemy. It is flinging God's gifts in his face.*

I think it is appropriate for us in this season of repentance to reflect on our sins against the nonhuman creatures of God and to change our ways. We need to reckon with the fact that our scriptures treat all animals, not just humans, as sacred creations. As we are all aware, humans have wrought great harm to the earth, especially to other animals. According to the Smithsonian, recent studies estimate that there are about eight million species on earth, of which at least fifteen thousand are threatened with extinction. And they go extinct at an amazing rate day by day. Scientists agree that today's extinction rate is hundreds or even thousands of times higher than the natural baseline rate.

If you Google rate of extinction and read the reports, well, it's horrifying. Our fellow creatures, whom God loves, are dying at an unprecedented and terrifying rate. And we are, at least in part, responsible for this tragedy.

The first chapter of Genesis declares that the vocation of humans is to guard creation with sovereign care, and we are failing.

I stood overlooking a creek with my son Marcus last summer. We were searching for trout in the stream with fishing in mind. We saw none. We talked about the decline of animal populations in many areas, and he said with genuine sorrow, *The earth is dying.* That hit me hard.

The earth is dying.

Marcus has read the scientific studies that show the insect, bird and fish populations declining at an alarming rate. He knows that we have polluted the water and the air and ruined habitat and upset natural balances, that we have mistreated and displaced other creatures and driven some of them—many of them—to extinction.

Of course, it is not entirely our doing. There are other forces at work. But our choices and actions have played a significant role in this sacrilege, the extinction of God's beloved animals. We have become deadly to our fellow animals, for whom God gave us responsibility.

Read the first chapter of Genesis again. When humans' role on the earth is defined, it is framed as a royal role. Humans are charged with guarding the animals, not lording it over them but instead protecting them as a good ruler would protect his or her subjects.

And we know that the planet is suffering a profound climate change now due in part to human activity. The predictions are frightening, but they have not been sufficiently motivating to inspire us to affect the kind of changes that are needed to slow or stop it. Our survival and the survival of all creatures is now in question. And I know that sounds extreme. I do. And it's easy to dismiss such statements with a wave of the hand. Surely it won't come to that. Won't it? Do we know that?

Those who know the evidence and best understand nature's processes are regularly sending up signal flares these days. They tell us that life on earth, human and non-human, is in trouble. If there is any chance at all that they are right, we should be doing a lot more than we are doing about the dying of the world. And not only to save ourselves, but to save the creatures with whom we live, our fellow animals. The animals cannot do a thing themselves to slow down what is happening. Only we can. The animals can only suffer the effects of our choices.

And so, this is a religious issue.

If we love God, we will love what God loves, align our hearts with God's heart. And God loves all flesh, every living animal. The Bible repeatedly calls us to alleviate suffering, to heal, to feed, to clothe. We typically apply this exclusively to humans, but I don't think

we can justly exclude the animals from our acts of mercy. Our creation stories give us a profound responsibility for the care of creation and all of its living creatures. And to the extent that we destroy the earth and kill other animals, we are failing in this first and most important vocation. If our subjects die, we have failed to fulfill our divinely appointed destiny.

God tells Noah, *as long as the earth endures, seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease*. The continuance of the living earth, human and non-human, is God's concern, and it must be ours as well. So let us consider during this Lent what it would mean to repent of things that are damaging the earth and destroying animals.

I'm not going to give you a list of things to do: buy LED light bulbs, etc. It's not my place to specify your repentance, only my own. If you're like me, you probably feel powerless when you hear of the destruction of the earth. The problem is so immense. And the effects of our actions individually are so small. What's another energy saving light bulb going to do to slow down the environmental disaster that is now breaking upon us?

I know our individual efforts seem too little to matter, but I also know that falling into hopelessness is not the way of repentance. To repent is to turn, not to simply feel badly that we have failed, but to turn. Let's find ways to turn this Lent. If you need inspiration, well, watch a nature special and be reminded of the wondrous creatures that God has made. Or, scratch your pets in their favorite spot. Be thankful for them—and then *do* something. Do one thing, anything. Tomorrow you can do another thing, and it will add up. And sometimes that's what repentance looks like.

Amen.