



First United Church of Oak Park

Blessed by God

Genesis 1: 20-25

The Rev. John Edgerton

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Where did life come from? Where did the animals come from? Why is the world so full of life everywhere all around? Well, that's the story of creation. And in the Christian faith, it is really two stories. And though it is a bit vexsome to modern sensibilities that these stories do not match up, in the sensibility of the ancient world, you should never settle for one story when two stories are twice as good.

Last year, in preaching on the blessing of the animals, I preached on the second creation story — the one with Adam and Eve in the garden. For this year, for symmetry's sake if nothing else, I'm going to preach on the first creation story — the one where God is always saying "let there be."

The first story of creation is cosmic and grand, with God something like a monarch pronouncing from just out of view. God speaks, and the order of things springs into being. The light as well as the stars that make up the light. The dark as well as the deep places that make up the holy darkness. The ocean with its waves and mysterious fishes. The land and all its multitude of life that creep and crawl and leap and run and walk. And last of all, human beings, made last of all and made in the image of God, whatever that means.

Now as a human being, I find it easy to look at that and say, well, since we were last, everything else must simply be prologue to my august presence, I who am made in God's image. But of course, I am not swifter than the light. I am not more glorious than the sun. I do not have greater constancy than the stars. God made these and said of them, it is good. That is a blessing; that is a divine benediction in an almost tautological sense. Benediction literally just means to say something is good, so for God to say, "It is good," that means it is blessed. The light does not owe the meaning of its existence to me. The light is good, all on its own. And worthy to be blessed.

And it is not just the light, either. Because in the first creation story, God created the animals, too. Those that walk on the earth, and swim in the ocean, and fly in the sky. All animals hop to and come into being — everything in its place — and God

declares of the animals ... they are good, they are good, they are all very good. Again, it is a divine benediction, a divine blessing for the animals all on their own. Yes, humanity is created last, and yes, we are created in the image of God. But that doesn't mean we are supposed to lord it over all creation as if nothing else matters. The earth and all its glory, all its beauty, the splendor of animal life, all of it is good all on its own without any input from human beings.

Well, then, if human beings aren't supposed to be lording it over the animals, what is our place? Well, we are supposed to be like God. To be made in the image of God means we should try to resemble God. And what is God doing here in the story of creation? God is blessing the animals; God is being a blessing to the animals.

This story of creation from the book of Genesis is so full of light and truth and joy — what a treasure it is. It lends to us all the credence we need for the tradition of the blessing of the animals. Our delight in our pets — this mirrors the delight that God showed in creation. God declared of the animals — they are good — and in our love for the animals in our life we affirm what God has said.

If you would like to participate in our blessing of the animals, I would invite you to grab — gently — your beloved animals, or pull a picture out if you are blessing the memory of an animal. This would be a good time to do that.

To think of the animals that have blessed my family, immediately bounding into my memory comes Joshua, the dog the size of a small pony; and Grundoon, the calico who only loved one person in all the world and it wasn't me; and her kitten Doris who loved all people equally (I'm not sure she could tell us apart). I think of Ta-Ta, the purebred Siamese who somehow wound up a stray in New Mexico, her kitten Dodge, who loved no food better than shoelaces. I think of Ralph the Basset Hound, whose nose saw an invisible world coiling around our feet, and Truffle the cat, prone to sneezing and with the sweetest disposition and the most alarming meow. I remember them all and bless them, because they are a blessing from God.

Have you got your animals? Got your photos? Please join in this blessing:

I promise to love you. I promise to care for you. I promise to pet you. I promise to walk you. I promise to feed you — but not as much as you would like me to. I promise that, if it is within my power, you will never get fleas or worms. I promise to keep you safe. And if, in the end, your death comes before mine, I promise to ease your passage home to God, in every way I can.

And to you the beloved animals who have died:

I promise to remember you. I promise to think fondly of the best parts of you. I promise not to dwell on memories of broken vases or linger too much on memories of the end. I promise to be grateful for you. You are worthy of it. You were formed by God's own hand. I promise all these things in the name of the Creator who formed us by hand, and in the name of Jesus our great high Shepherd, and in the name of the Spirit who broods over us, like a hen over her chicks.

Amen.