**Sermon: Human Being and Creature Being**

**Scripture: Job 12**

**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**

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In ancient Judaism there is a story in the midrash about why God chose Moses to lead the Hebrew people out of slavery. In Genesis we learn that God appears to Moses in a burning bush and asks Moses to go to Egypt and set God’s people free and all that follows from there but we don’t hear why Moses was the one chosen… until a midrash text explains in about the 300’s AD.

“Once while Moses, our Teacher, was tending his father-in-law’s sheep, one of the sheep ran away. Moses ran after it until it reached a small shaded place. There, the lamb came across a pool and began to drink. As Moses approached the lamb, he said “I did not know you ran away because you were thirsty. You are so exhausted!” He then put the lamb on his shoulders and carried him back. The Holy One said “Since you tend the sheep of human beings with such overwhelming love – by your life, I swear you shall be the shepherd of my sheep Israel.”

That is so typical of God, isn’t it? Of the God revealed in Judaism, that God is not impressed so much with mighty human stature and power and accomplishment as much as God is moved by the compassion a shepherd boy showed to a lamb drinking at the lakeside. “This is the Heart of My own Heart,” you can hear God saying, “one who shows mercy and compassion to My creatures.”

Animals in the surrounding pagan cultures at the time were at most the extras in the earthly drama; props, objects of fantasy, superstitious symbols, mythical figures, embodiments of departed souls and communicating divinities. It was only in the stories and writings of the early Hebrews that animals were acknowledged as creatures in their own right; namely, creatures lovingly created by God, pronounced blessed, and there to show forth that God is sovereign, as was spoken in our scriptures this morning – “ask the animals, let them teach you, they know and agree that God is sovereign holding all things in His hands.”

This too is our calling as human beings to show forth the Sovereign God in our lives but clearly alongside our fellow creature-beings who hold the same purpose. We can forget them and have forgotten the too much in our human religion-keeping, imagining that the salvation drama is a human drama despite that fact that our scriptures make it clear that it is SO much more than human.

God gives the human being “dominion” Genesis says which is primarily the capacity to name the animals and thereby bless them. I mean, listen to this from Genesis 2 – “Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every fowl of the air and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them.” What a beautiful exchange between God, Adam and the animals. This radical tender-hearted notion that God, the creator of universes cares. “Here Adam, what do you call this mouse, this ocelot - nice, this swan – beautiful, and this dove, oh lovely, that whale, this wolf, that cougar and lion.. incredible isn’t it Adam.” God is bedazzled by God’s own creation, delighting in the Garden of Eden and inviting Adam to join in the blessing. You’d think God would have more important things to do and to plan and to focus on.

But it’s always this way with this God. Nothing too small or insignificant for Her attention. Jesus marvels at this during his sermon on the Mount when he says “look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns but Your Heavenly Father feeds them.” And images of Jesus throughout the New Testament are closely linked with an animal, it’s critical to his mission to be so linked, to the lamb. Jesus is often referred to as the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us. It’s not by chance that our attention is brought to the animal world cause it’s from there that our mercy, compassion and love is called forth.

The call to mercy and care for creation is activated in us so viscerally by the animals around us, especially our own pets who inhabit our homes and bless our children and bring us the joy of laughter and comfort amidst tears. And this has never been more evident than in this year 2020. What a blessing our animals have been for many a lonely and cooped up person or family, eh?

And they pull out of us great love and tenderness and compassion and joy, don’t they? Gone are the questions about whether animals have souls, right? Can we let that wonder go and affirm without hesitation, yes, of course they do! If you know Chester or Sugar or Colin or Jewel or Lucky or Gus, you know that they know and that they feel and that they hurt and that they await and that they hope. We are coming around I think, finally acknowledging the reality of the consciousness and sentience that God blessed not just the human race with but so much of God’s creation, in fact every last microbe of it? “God is sovereign and hold all things in his hand, every living soul, yes, every breathing creature.” Clear enough? I mean it was said 3000 years ago by Judaism and now science is saying “it seems that trees themselves are alive in ways we had no idea!”

It finally dawns on us silly humans when an ape points to a swan and uses the signs she’s been taught to name it “this is a water bird” that there’s much more going on there than we thought. And we’re brought up short, literally our arrogance toppled a bit, when in studying elephants we realize that they show communal celebrations and grief, sorrow for their dead and they have nightmares and communicate intricately and creatively with one another. And when we listen to the songs of whales it cracks open our minds and hearts and when we see dolphins using sea sponges as foraging tools, it all finally gives us pause to say “oh, maybe this isn’t all about us. Maybe we are not as supreme as we suppose. Maybe when God created us with bodies of earth and souls of heaven and invited us to name the creatures of the earth, that was a privilege of blessing a living soul, not permission to have dominion over its life.”

And a dawning awareness of the remarkable sentient life that inhabits this world with us ideally brings us to our knees in humility; to thank God for the miracle of it all and to hold in profound respect the animal life that accompanies us on this earthly journey.

And while we are down on our knees it might lead us to a confession or two, at least, because this must be at least in part how we come before God as Christians with a humble confessing heart, and when it comes to our relationship to the animal world we do in fact have much to confess, that these creature beings, who are beloved of God and no less conscious and able to suffer than our own dogs and cats, are brutalized by factory farms to be raised and slaughtered for the burgers on our plates and these sentient beings, full of grace in the waters, are killed by the millions as by-catch so that we can enjoy our sushi dinners and other creature beings we’ve genetically modified for short speedy growth lives spent squat and immobilized in cages, so that we can have an order of wings at our side.

The only reason we are not devastated at heart by what human food industries do to our fellow creatures, allowing such suffering for the turn of massive profits, is only that we haven’t had the stomach to look. Those who do, catch a jarring glimpse of the depth of human sinfulness and can only imagine God’s grief at what we do and how it mars the collective soul of creation. Let me return to that beautiful prayer that Karen Bellacosa read from the 4th century saint, Basil of Caesaria who prayed this long before the advent of mass production slaughterhouses…

We remember with shame that… we have exercised the high dominion of man with ruthless cruelty so that the voice of the earth which should have gone up to thee in song has been a groan of travail. May we realize that the animals live not for us and our sakes but for themselves and for You and that they too love the sweetness of life.

Or from the words of the late award-winning journalist Malcolm Muggeridge who asked once “How is it possible to look for God and sing His praises while insulting and degrading his creatures? If, as I had thought, all lambs are the Agnus Dei, then to deprive them of the light and the fields and their joyous frisking and the sky itself (and we do just that by the millions) is the worst kind of blasphemy.”

Cause in the holy scriptures of our faith, it’s more than evident, that God cares about the least lamb – run off because she was thirsty – and God cares about the most discarded human and the beauty of communicating forests. No detail is so small, no soul so slight that God does not breath God’s live in and through them. So let us embrace our beloved and personal animals, giving thanks for the gift they are to our lives but let’s also allow them to speak to us of what we owe their sibling creatures as well, our sibling creatures of the earth, and may we become an ever more merciful and compassionate species because the earth needs us to be more merciful and compassionate, in the name of the lamb who takes away the sin of the world, amen!