



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
The Reverend Peter Thompson, Vicar

## Mere Specks

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 3, 2022*

*The Feast of St. Francis*

*Based on Job 39:1-18; Galatians 6:14-18; Matthew 11:25-30*

*Let all things their creator bless  
And worship him in humbleness.  
Alleluia! Amen.*

There's a certain irony in the fact that the medieval friar who has become known as the patron saint of pets prohibited his own followers from having them. "I command all my brothers, both cleric and lay," St. Francis of Assisi wrote in his Rule of 1221, "that when they go through the world or dwell in places they in no way keep any animal either with them, in the care of another, or in any other way."<sup>1</sup> Augustine Thompson, one of Francis' biographers, speculates that, by banning pets, Francis aimed to encourage his fellow friars "not to treat animals as objects or possessions."<sup>2</sup> Francis' extreme commitment to poverty, of course, made him highly suspicious of any kind of ownership. He famously forbade his friars from accepting or even carrying coins. But, given Francis' particular appreciation for the animal world, if it is difficult to imagine Francis condoning the ownership of a nice jacket or a beautiful piece of art, it is almost impossible to envision him tolerating a dog on a leash or a hamster in a cage.

Francis' association with pets, or the beings some might refer to as domestic animals or animal companions, is actually of more recent origin than many might assume. Francis has long been well-known for his interactions with animals in general. On one occasion, he preached a sermon to the birds; on another, he reportedly brokered peace between a city and a wolf. Yet Francis was hardly the only saint to have been linked with non-human creatures. The first recorded animal blessings, in fact, invoked not Francis but another saint, a fourth-century Egyptian monk named Anthony the Abbot. For at least a hundred years, Roman Catholics in Europe, Mexico and other places have gathered on St. Anthony's day to bless the farm animals that provide for their livelihood. Even in Francis' hometown of Assisi, to this very day, animals are blessed on the feast of St. Anthony the Abbot rather than on the feast of St. Francis.<sup>3</sup>

Episcopalians did not start blessing animals in any widespread way until the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, in Morningside Heights, held its first blessing of the animals on the Sunday closest to the feast of St. Francis in 1985. By organizing an entire liturgy around non-human animals, the Church was correcting for hundreds of years of anthropocentrism, of arrogantly placing human beings at the center of the universe. It was acknowledging the increasing role that animal companions played in human lives as the composition and size of human households shifted. It was making a statement about the importance of caring for Creation as the effects of climate change became clearer than ever before. But there were also ulterior motives at work. As the influence of organized religion waned, church leaders knew they had to

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.franciscantradition.org/francis-of-assisi-early-documents/writings-of-francis/the-earlier-rule/88-fa-ed-1-page-73>.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine Thompson, *Francis of Assisi: A New Biography*, 55.

<sup>3</sup> For background on blessing of animals services, I consulted Laura Hobgood-Oster's *Holy Dogs and Asses: Animals in the Christian Tradition* and Patricia Applebaum's *St. Francis of America: How A Thirteenth-Century Friar Became America's Most Popular Saint*.

put on a spectacle in order to get people to show up. The blessing of the animals is still a useful tool for evangelism—for bringing people through the door. We know that if we invite your animals, you might come, too.

Over the course of the past thirty-seven years, the practice of blessing animals has become quite popular in the US, not only in Episcopal circles but also in a wide variety of Christian and non-Christian contexts. Though these blessings almost always take place on the first weekend in October, in deliberate proximity to the feast of St. Francis, the link between animal blessings and Francis remains tangential and even somewhat misleading. Francis, after all, was not only interested in matters relating to non-humans; he was also interested in poverty, in the well-being of lepers, in Christian-Muslim relations, in the Holy Eucharist, in the suffering of Christ on the Cross, and in other teachings of the Church. Francis had plenty of human concerns, too.

It's also true that Francis' interest in Nature was not limited to animals. His best-known work, *Canticle of the Creatures* (also called *Canticle of Brother Sun*), is one of the longest surviving poems in the Italian vernacular, written about a hundred years before Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Petrarch's sonnets. For our purposes, what's fascinating about the *Canticle of the Creatures* is that it never mentions non-human animals—not even once. The creatures on which its attention is largely focused are Sun, Moon, Wind, Water, Fire, and the Earth itself. Francis finds himself needing to praise God not for individual living beings but for the entire planets and forces on which all forms of life depend. Francis' hymn-poem serves as a reminder of how massive and multifaceted Creation is, how we and all the human beings and animals with whom we interact are mere specks in much larger and far more complicated cosmos.

Today's confusing reading from the book of Job is an excerpt from a longer speech God directs towards the title character. Job has dared to doubt God's commitment to justice. God's response is a rhetorical question: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?"<sup>4</sup> God goes on to ask Job about his understanding of the seas, the stars, the sky, and precipitation like snow, rain, and hail. Throughout, God's tone is goading and sarcastic. God's point is that Job is ignorant and insignificant. Job knows very little about the universe and has very little power within it. He is a mere speck.

Midway through God's speech, God turns to the animal kingdom. Though the exact subject of God's discourse shifts, God's overall point remains the same. Job cannot possess the animals of the earth any more than he can possess the dirt and the sea and the sky. Nature is not something that human beings can ultimately own or manage or control; we are mere specks in a much larger and far more complicated system.

Of course, those of you who live with animals, whether human or non-human, are already aware of the limits of your powers and abilities. You know that you can make important impacts on those you love through your efforts to guide and train and cajole, but in the end there is only a certain extent to which you can influence the behavior of another.

A more sober reminder of our limits came this week from Hurricane Ian. We learned once more how little we can control the same water and wind for which Francis offered his joyful praise to God. The forces of water and wind are bigger than we are; they resist all our efforts to marshal and confine them. This Friday's episode of the podcast *The Daily* opened with Captain Tim Rushing, a leader of charter fishing expeditions in the waters around Naples, Florida. You would think that Captain Rushing would know a lot about the powers of Mother Nature, but he found himself blindsided by Ian. Though he spent several days making preparations for the storm around his house, stockpiling food and tuning up his generator, he felt confident that he wouldn't have to evacuate. And then the water kept coming. By the time he left his

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<sup>4</sup> Job 38:4.

house, the flood level was at his belly. If he had waited another thirty minutes, he estimated, he would have been too late. “You can be ready for power,” he said, “you can be ready for food, you can prepare for everything else, but you can’t stop that water from rising.”<sup>5</sup>

St. Francis’ love for Creation is easily trivialized as a cheery celebration of cuteness. It’s also easily instrumentalized as a clarion call to mobilize against climate change. Francis certainly thought that Creation was beautiful and holy and believed that it should be treated with utmost respect. But Francis’ encounter with Creation was, for him, primarily an invitation to humility.

Francis’ Canticle of the Creatures is bookended with reminders to be humble: “Most High, all-powerful, good Lord, Yours are the praises, the glory, and the honor, and all blessing, To You alone, Most High, do they belong, and no human is worthy to mention Your name... Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks and serve Him with great humility.” After praising God through the Sun, the Moon, Wind, Water, Fire, and the Earth, all planets and forces over which Francis knew he had no ultimate control, Francis offered praise through those who “bear infirmity and tribulation... Blessed are those,” Francis wrote, “who endure in peace.” Francis knew that human beings were limited, that infirmity and tribulation would come and, with patience, could be endured.<sup>6</sup>

By the time Francis began writing his Canticle of the Creatures, he was near the end of his life. He had long ago stripped off his expensive cloak in front of his earthly father and pledged to serve a heavenly one instead. He had long ago renounced any claim to the wealth into which he had been born and pledged to live without possessions. In more recent years, he had learned that, despite all of his popularity and spiritual prowess, he could not manage even his own followers, and he had decided to relinquish control of his order to someone else. A few weeks before his death, he called two of his companions to his bedside. Now his body was failing. He was experiencing his limitations in a new way, and he had one more stanza left to write:

Praised be you, my Lord, for our Sister Bodily Death,  
Whom no one living can escape...  
Blessed are those whom death finds in your most holy will.

His Canticle of the Creatures was now complete. Seven hundred years later, in the early twentieth century, Anglican priest William Henry Draper wrote a paraphrase of the canticle in English. It is sung often, but it is rarely sung in full.

All creatures of our God and King,  
Lift up your voice and with us sing:  
Alleluia, Alleluia!  
Thou burning sun with golden beam,  
Thou silver moon with softer gleam,  
O praise him, Alleluia!

Thou rushing wind that art so strong,  
Ye clouds that sail in heaven along.  
O praise him, Alleluia!  
Thou rising morn, in praise rejoice,  
Ye lights of evening, find a voice.  
O praise him, Alleluia!

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/30/podcasts/the-daily/hurricane-ian-florida.html>.

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canticle\\_of\\_the\\_Sun](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canticle_of_the_Sun).

Thou flowing water, pure and clear,  
Make music for thy Lord to hear,  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
Thou fire so masterful and bright,  
Thou givest [us] both warmth and light,  
O praise him, Alleluia!

Dear mother earth, who day by day  
Unfoldest blessings on our way,  
O praise him, Alleluia!  
The flowers and fruits that in thee grow,  
Let them his glory also show.  
O praise him, Alleluia!

And all ye [ones] of tender heart,  
Forgiving others, take your part,  
O sing ye, Alleluia!  
Ye who long pain and sorrow bear,  
Praise God, and on him cast your care.  
O praise him, Alleluia!

And thou most kind and gentle Death,  
Waiting to hush our latest breath,  
O praise him, Alleluia!  
Thou leadest home the child of God,  
And Christ our Lord the way hath trod.  
O praise him, Alleluia!

Let all things their Creator bless,  
And worship him in humbleness,  
O praise him, Alleluia!  
Praise, praise the Father, praise the Son,  
And praise the Spirit, Three in One.  
O praise him, O praise him,  
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!<sup>7</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> I used the first published text of the paraphrase, as found here: <https://www.hymnologyarchive.com/all-creatures-of-our-god>. I altered two instances of gendered language so as to not distract from the overall message. I also removed some repetitions within the text.