

October 2 – St. Francis Day

St. Francis Day falls on this coming Sunday. Despite—perhaps even aided by the necessity of worshipping outside—the liturgy will be a shortened form of Morning Prayer with a blessing of animals incorporated in it. So, please, if you like and if it is convenient, bring your fur, fin, hide, and feather persons with you.

A quick word about the logistics. We will be physically distanced, so that will help with creature management. I have done dozens of St. Francis Day services, blessing snakes, ferrets, guinea pigs, horses, cockatiels, cats, dogs, mice, fish, etc.—even a stuffed teddy bear—and I am not daunted by the possibilities nor worried about noise and behavior. Our animal friends take many cues from us, so if we are calm, they feel better. Also, the whole event will be strange to them and their first reaction will be to protect themselves by hiding or falling very quiet. Sure, dogs may bark—fine. There isn't the dog born who can talk louder than I 😊. We'll be fine.

Perhaps you wonder about the Teddy bear. Well, the young child had severe allergies and Reddi Teddi was the only animal-like companion she could have. I can always bless love, and I did. Besides, if we can dedicate bricks and mortar, consecrate bread and wine, give thanks for the earth, sky, and sea, surely we can be happy to make a child's eyes shine because HER friend gets a blessing, too.

I also once did a burial office for a cockatiel. 40 years ago and far away I convinced my boss to have a St. Francis Day pet blessing and an elderly parishioner walked to church carrying two cockatiels, one on each shoulder. Because I did the blessing liturgy, she called me some time later asking for a burial service for one of the birds. She had wrapped the creature carefully and put it in her freezer to keep until she could have a service and arrange a cremation. Her plan was to keep the ashes on a mantelpiece. I offered the service, the bird was cremated and the remains were stored in a lovely old ginger jar. Again, I can always bless love and celebrate the unity of creation.

If what I did seems maudlin or ridiculous, don't let the people at the War Dogs Memorial in New Jersey know, or the Sgt. Stubby memorial and the Balto memorial in NYC, or the people who raised the monument to Laboratory mice in Novosibirsk, Russia, or those who were grateful for Towser the cat at the

Glenturrent Distillery, and Wojtek the soldier bear in Scotland. The list can go on and on down through history and around the world in remembrance and thanks.

Kris Hunt sent me the following quote hoping I might use it Sunday. I think it deserves a wider reception than our modest congregational attendance can be in these hard times, so I am putting it here.

“We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals. Remote from universal nature and living by complicated artifice, man in civilization surveys the creature through the glass of his knowledge and sees thereby a feather magnified and the whole image in distortion. We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate for having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein do we err. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, gifted with the extension of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings: they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth.”

— Henry Beston, *The Outermost House: A Year of Life On The Great Beach of Cape Cod*, pp. 24-25, (75th anniversary edition, St. Martins Press).

No part of our St. Francis Day liturgy is merely sentimental. Animals have lives, and the individual struggle to live is neither easy nor clean. The processes of nature must be looked at honestly, studied carefully, and appreciated as adaptations to an environment with which—in a larger sense—we share with them.

Edwin Way Teale, whom I have quoted before, had this to say in his Sept 26th entry in his book, *Circle of the Seasons*:

“Those who walk abroad and see only beauty in nature...they have never really seen this world at all...The unpleasant, too, is part of the world.”

Then Teale quotes another great writer and naturalist, British entomologist L. C. Miall, who wrote in the early 20th century,

who mused about how some insects prey upon others in ways easy to anthropomorphize and be appalled by as we study them (his example was the ichneumon wasp and the caterpillar!). At the end of his great work, *Natural History of Aquatic Insects*, Miall observes,

“When we have to tell what we have seen and found, it is our business to give a true account, disguising nothing, and keeping nothing back. But let us be careful not to speak as if our little plummets had sounded the depths of the universe. Those who have surpassed their fellows in the improvement of natural knowledge, have always been the first to admit that what they have come to know is lost in the infinitude of the unknown.”

In the spirit of awe and appreciation, then, I hope you will join us in person or at least in prayer on Sunday as we give thanks and praise for the life we share with all of creation on this fragile earth, our island home.