

Sermon for Sunday, October 4, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Today, October 4,
is the feast day
of Saint Francis.
And it's the day
when we traditionally
give thanks for
our animal friends.

St Francis is one
in a long line of saints
who are associated
with animals.

St. Kevin of Glendalough is said to have been
kneeling in his monastic cell
with his arms stretched out, praying.
Because his cell was so small, one hand
stuck out a window.
Suddenly a blackbird landed
and laid an egg.
And, so the legend goes,
St Kevin stayed in that position
until the egg hatched.

St. Brigid is said to have given sanctuary to a wild boar,
turned a fox into a loving pet for the king,
and was followed by a cow.

St. Hugh of Lincoln had a friendship with a swan,
and was protected by it
while he slept.
But it is St Francis
that most often comes to mind
when we think of saints
and animals.

And the legends about him
are numerous.

Francis is said to have made a pact with a savage wolf
not to harm the people of a town
in exchange for food
and the wolf offered its paw as a sign of agreement.
He supposedly quieted a flock of birds and preached to them;
- they were a good audience and didn't leave
until he said they could.

He was careful not to step on an ant, and tried to have laws made
to provide a "bounteous meal" for all animals on Christmas Day.

Animals
were said to "instinctively surround" him,
becoming so attached to him
that they would repeatedly hop into his lap.

Those are the legends.

But do you know the story
behind them?

Francis was likely born
in late 1181 or early 1182.
He was one of seven children
of the prosperous silk merchant, Pietro di Bernardino,
and his wife, a noblewoman called Pica de Bourlemont,
who lived in Assisi.

Pietro was away on business in France at the time,
so Pica named the baby Giovanni,
but when Pietro returned to Assisi,
he began calling the baby Francesco,
which means, "the Frenchman"
perhaps in honor of his trip to France.

Growing up,
Francis helped his father in his business,
which probably accounts for stories of his love of rich clothing.
Apparently he became interested in troubadours,
the musicians and composers who sang about chivalry
and courtly love,
and reveled in the lifestyle of his wealthy peers.

In 1201, he joined a military expedition,
and ended up being taken prisoner
and held captive for a year.
But when he got back to Assisi, he continued his previous life.
It wasn't until a serious illness
a year or so later
that he had a spiritual crisis,
and soon afterwards, on his way to join another military expedition,
he had a strange vision
and returned home

There, in spite of his father's opposition,
he began to explore religion,
spending time in prayer,
nursing lepers, and, on a pilgrimage to Rome,
joining the poor
begging at the doors of churches.
He then had a mystical vision of Jesus Christ
in the country chapel of San Damiano, just outside of Assisi,
in which he heard Christ say
"Francis, Francis, go and repair my house
which, as you can see, is falling into ruins."

He took this to mean the ruined church
that he was praying in,
and so he sold some cloth from his father's store
to pay for the repairs.
His father
was not happy.

After threats, beatings, and legal proceedings,
Francis renounced his father and his inheritance,
and lived as a beggar.
He spent time restoring other ruined chapels in the country around Assisi, and in early
1209
heard a sermon that changed his life.
It was from Matthew, chapter 10,
where Jesus tells his followers
to go and proclaim that the Kingdom of Heaven was upon them,

and to take nothing with them, not money or even shoes.
And Francis was inspired to devote himself to a life
of preaching
and poverty.

He began preaching, and soon attracted a number of followers.
In 1210 the Pope confirmed
the simple Rule for the Order of Friars Minor,
and the order grew rapidly,
and soon attracted women as well,
and so the order of Poor Clares was formed.

In 1219
Francis travelled to Egypt in an attempt to convert the Sultan
and put an end to the conflict of the Crusades.
Although he was unsuccessful,
his relationships with Muslim leaders
are probably the reason
that after the Holy Land was taken over by Islamic leaders
and most Christians forced out,
the Franciscans
were the only ones
allowed to stay.

In the early 1220s
Francis is said to have celebrated Christmas
by setting up the first known Nativity scene,
using a straw filled manger, an ox and a donkey.

And not long before his death, during a retreat,
he had a vision and received the stigmata,
the marks of Christ's death in his hands and feet.
He died in late 1226, and within two years
was pronounced a saint.

One of the hallmarks of Francis' preaching
was his emphasis on creation
as God's good and beautiful gift.
He called on all creation
to praise God,

and all people
to protect and enjoy nature
as stewards of God's creation
and as creatures ourselves.

He left few writings,
but the most loved is the one
that our opening hymn is based on,
the Canticle
of the Sun.

Most High, all-powerful, all-good Lord,
All praise is Yours, all glory, honor and blessings.
To you alone, Most High, do they belong;
no mortal lips are worthy to pronounce Your Name.
We praise You, Lord, for all Your creatures,
especially for Brother Sun,
who is the day through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor,
of You Most High, he bears your likeness.
We praise You, Lord, for Sister Moon and the stars,
in the heavens you have made them bright, precious and fair.
We praise You, Lord, for Brothers Wind and Air,
fair and stormy, all weather's moods,
by which You cherish all that You have made.
We praise You, Lord, for Sister Water,
so useful, humble, precious and pure.
We praise You, Lord, for Brother Fire,
through whom You light the night.
He is beautiful, playful, robust, and strong.
We praise You, Lord, for Sister Earth,
who sustains us
with her fruits, colored flowers, and herbs.
We praise You, Lord, for those who pardon,
for love of You bear sickness and trial.
Blessed are those who endure in peace,
by You Most High, they will be crowned.
We praise You, Lord, for Sister Death,
from whom no-one living can escape.
Woe to those who die in their sins!

Blessed are those that She finds doing Your Will.
No second death can do them harm.
We praise and bless You, Lord, and give You thanks,
and serve You in all humility.

This month
we will have our annual pledge and stewardship campaign,
and it is appropriate we begin with Francis
who offered all he had -
his wealth and his life
to God,
and gave thanks
for all that God had given him,
especially in creation.

Today
as we celebrate his feast day,
I'd invite you
to think about where you see God's blessings around you.
Then find someone near you - preferably not a family member - try the pew in front or
behind,
introduce yourselves
and then share some of the blessings you've experienced from God
and how you might thank God
in response.