**St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church**

19th Sunday after Pentecost

St. Francis of Assisi

The Canticle of the Sun

Psalm 148

*Revelation 5:11-14*

Matthew 6:25-29

First and Last

Once in a while, I will find a cartoon in a paper or magazine that I think is worth keeping and for many years I have held on to one in particular which sits in my St. Francis Day file folder. The scene goes like this: St. Peter is standing in the clouds at his podium just outside the gates of heaven. He has an assistant angel, standing with him, who is looking rather worriedly at the rear end of a dog, tail up, as the dog digs deeper and deeper into the clouds with the clear goal of tunneling under the heavenly fence to find his way into heaven. St. Peter, too, is watching the dog, and with a look of normal acceptancy says, “Doesn’t’ matter how she enters – all dogs are automatically in.”

Of course, I’m a dog person, so the line resonated with me right away. You may be a cat person, so you can adjust the picture. Maybe the cat is sitting on top of the fence as if to say, I can go to heaven when I please, but for now, I’ll just sit here and observe how many humans get in or don’t.

Or maybe you’re a bird or a fish person, and you could use the argument that God created you before the dog or the cat and that it was only because God saw that it was so good on the fourth day, that God kept going on the fifth day, and on the sixth day God ended up producing all the other creatures of the earth including humankind.

But much as we love to split hairs, let’s just say, God looked at all God’s sentient beings, birds, fish, wild and domestic creatures of all kinds, including humankind, and saw that it was all really good, and thus God instructed all creation to go out and multiply. The only caveat hinted at was that humankind would have dominion over the rest of the creatures.

One wonders how many times in the time since, that for all in the animal kingdom and for all humankind has the question come up regarding that vastly misunderstood directive!

How much we wish God could have been more explicit. After only God know how many million years, humankind is just now figuring out the difference between dominion and domination, the difference between stewardship and power.

There is no doubt that dominion is power in the hands of those who have it, but it is not meant as authority, the power to enforce or give orders. Rather, while it grants sovereignty over those without dominion, it carries within its meaning an obligation to stewardship. In other words, while the God-given dominion granted to humankind might offer the opportunity to rule over nature, it by no means grants permission to control and have power over all other living beings for humankind’s own selfish purposes. This was never God’s intent. God gave humankind dominion over all of nature **on behalf of God!** To have dominion over nature and all living beings, all creatures of the earth that belong to communities other than human, in order to serve humankind alone is an abomination to God.

Stewardship, in the biblical world perspective can be defined as taking care of, or guarding and protecting, and yes, managing, all the recourses God has provide for the glory of God and the continuation and embellishment of God’s original Creation. “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

It is a good mantra for us to remember on this St. Francis Day and in all the days to come. It reminds us to remember that our call to stewardship of God’s creation and all that lives and breathes within it, is a call for good and honorable stewardship ….good and honorable dominion, management and care. Perhaps the most powerful reminder we could have at all, is to remember that God has entrusted God’s creation to our care. God did not entrust God’s amazing Creation to our domination, not to our cruelty or neglect, nor to our misunderstanding or mismanagement, whether that dominion be over the environment and its delicate ecological balance, or over all that lives and breathes, including humankind’s dependence on that very same balance for its own survival.

So one cannot help asking why it is that humankind insists on not understanding God’s intent for God’s people to enter into the stewardship of co-creating with God. The work of co-Creation isn’t that hard. Everyone can take some action or offer financial assistance to help in the protection and guardianship of some aspect of the environment, or a particular creature or creatures or groups of creatures. An action can be a simple as clipping a small ring of plastic to ensure that if that plastic finds its way into the environment, no small beak will become ensnared within it, no fish will swallow it, and that to ensure it doesn’t find its way into the landfill or the ocean, recycles every bit of it that could interfere with God’s cosmic plan at its inception. One can volunteer to clean beaches, or woods, or sidewalks, or birds whose wings have been glued together with oil from oil spills. One can plant a tree or many trees, or plant habitat for the wild creatures who find their habitat shrinking by the day and we give thanks that, here at St. Aidan’s, we have habitat for the creatures who share this part of God’s kingdom with us.

My friends in faith, we are called to stewardship as a means to empowerment and not to cause powerlessness, helplessness, hopelessness or defenselessness in any living creature who is called to use their own God-given gifts, not only to survive, but to thrive and offer to the world all that is theirs to offer.

Every year, at this time, we honor one who knew well the meaning of God’s call to dominion and stewardship and we respond to St. Francis by offering up those creatures, great and small, whom God has placed in our paths, and with whom we have entered into a kind of mutual love built on love and stewardship. This covenant between humankind and the creatures of the earth is not new, nor was it new in St. Francis’ time of 13th century Italy.

It must have begun even before Eve encountered the serpent in the Garden of Eden, for as we remember, all the creatures of the earth were created before humankind. The angels were there at the beginning, too, and they don’t seem to have any problem figuring out what kind of relationship God intended for all God’s creatures and people to enjoy. There are references aplenty throughout the Bible, indicating that very relationship.

Take the story of Tobias, the son of Tobit, who’s own story is included in the Apocrypha, that part of the Bible, which was removed from the canon, yet is often included in our liturgical scripture reading.

Tobit was getting old, and a bit blind, and remembered back in the remnants of his memory, that he had, in the past, loaned some money to a relative. He decides to send his son, Tobias, to collect the money owed to him. A guide is hired, who was none other than the Angel Raphael. Raphael’s divine status was completely unknown to Tobit and his son.

The two set off, accompanied by Tobias’ dog, named Hera, (named perhaps for the ancient mythological Greek goddess, Hera, wife of Zeus.) They walked and walked and the days went by as Hera chased off wild animals and barked warnings at the birds. They came to the great, deep River Tigris and had no choice but to cross it and while doing so, Tobias is attacked by, what seems to Tobias, was an enormous fish.

In reality it just an ordinary fish, not much bigger than the kind of fish you would catch for dinner. So they cleaned the fish and cooked it after Raphael instructed Tobias to save the fish’s eyes and scales to for medicinal purposes. There are more adventures, during which Tobias falls in love, marries, adding another to the little groups which returns home to Tobit.

Tobit is now completely blind. “Now is the time to use the fish eyes,” whispered Raphael. Sara ground the fish eyes into a thin paste which then Tobias rubbed on to his father’s eyes. Suddenly, the blindness dropped from his eyes like the scales of a fish, and Tobit could see clearly again.

Tobit looked for Raphael to thank him for this miracle of returned sight and for guiding his son so well. But all he could see was a man surrounded and filled with light and it looked like there were silver wings. Maybe, he thought it was just the sun shining in eyes that had been blind for so long, for suddenly the light was gone and
Raphael had quite disappeared.

Heras the dog saw it all, and maybe knew all along that Raphael was an angel. It’s a funny little story, and quite humorous, filled with action, and a bit of mythological in comparison to any other story in the Bible. Perhaps the most unusual aspect of the story is the presence of a dog. There are lots of stories which include angels, like Raphael, and quite a few appearances of dogs, yet, unfortunately, not many of these stories hold positive images of dogs, as does this one. Dogs were considered scavengers in the ancient cultures, and indeed, in some cultures today. They were not considered pets or companions. [[2]](#footnote-2)

Perhaps that is why the story of Tobit is worth remembering because it is clear Hera was cast as a member of the travelling group, which leaves us to believe Tobias wasn’t going anywhere without his dog, and his dog wasn’t going anywhere without Tobias. They were friends.

We know that Raphael is an angel come as an answer to Tobit’s prayer through God’s good grace. But here is the significant point of the story. In Tobit’s book, Tobit already sort of knew that God would send an angel to look after his son on his journey. When Tobit blesses both of them and saying, “May God in heaven bring you both safely there and return you both in good health to me……”, he adds, “And may His angel….. accompany you both for your safety.” So, if you do the math, you sense that there are suddenly three to be counted in the group. Perhaps Hera, scaring off wild animals and birds, and never leaving Tobias’ side, was an angel too.

The problem with humankind is that it requires proof of the existence of angels in any form. Leaving a dog outside on a chain during the snows of winter, or allowing indiscriminate loss of habitat in one’s backyard or in the forests, or at the edge of town is to tamper with God’s own in God’s creation. If humankind could simply remember that a dog, cat, rabbit, mole, badger or hedgehog is just as much God’s own as is man or woman, then maybe, just maybe, humankind might stop thinking more about dominion for God’s sake and a whole lot less about domination, for the sake of humankind.

If you think about who God created first and who God created last, you can quickly acknowledge the angels created in God’s image, who were there in the beginning with God. Then, with all humility, you recall that humankind was created last, days after all the creatures of land, air, sea.

And it would do well for us to remember that God grants immediate entry into Heaven to all those who have served with unconditional love, with innocence, utilizing all their God-given gifts to the extent that God intended, without question or complaint, much like the dog in my cartoon.

So who says that when God provides guides, guardians, protectors and loyal companions, they are not required by God to have two legs, but may well walk on four, or more or less, and who are we to say they don’t have silver wings and know just as much, or more, than we dare to think.

Amen.

Written to the Glory of God

E. J, R. Culver+

October 3, 2021

1. Psalm 24:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tobit 5:17 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)