

*Come Holy Spirit, come like the wind and cleanse; take these words and give them your life. Amen.*

The gospels don't record any instances of Jesus interacting with animals –  
unless you count his setting free the sacrificial pigeons,  
cattle and sheep in the temple.

If he was indeed born in a stable, it's possible his first memory was of staring up  
into the eyes of a cow breathing over him.

And he told stories about animals, mostly sheep, who provided abundant  
metaphors for him about following, wandering, tending and caring.

He told a story about a sheep so precious, the shepherd left 99 perfectly good  
sheep untended to go searching for the one who'd wandered off,  
and did not rest until he found and brought that sheep home.

That's how beloved we are of God –  
that God would not rest until we're brought home.

And Jesus used an example of birds to convey the care and provision of God.

*They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns,  
and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.*

Jesus invites us to look at the animals around us to learn about the ways of God.  
And man, do they have a lot to teach us!

Animals are often generous and loving, loving us unconditionally. So is God.  
Animals are wild, other, not completely knowable by human means. So is God.  
Animals display beauty, sorrow, fierceness, protectiveness – so does God.  
Animals have their own wills; they may be subject to us,  
but never completely controllable by us. Neither is God.

When have you had an encounter or relationship with an animal  
that spoke to you of God?

Jesus did not give instructions on how we are to treat the natural world  
or its creatures – but he did teach us this:

Do unto others as you would have them do to you.

Treat others the way you would want them to treat you.

If we take this “golden rule” as our guide in how we interact with our pets,  
and with the other creatures with which we share this world,  
we might find ourselves honoring more than exploiting.

And it's not just animals – scientists now know that plants have vast and sophisticated networks of communication; that trees nurture and protect one another.

We are connected to such richness and diversity and wealth of knowledge if only we can see ourselves as part of it, not apart from it or over it. Even when we consume animals for food, we can stop to honor the life that was given, and not pretend there was no life there to give.

I'd like to think that Jesus was a cat-lover or maybe there was a dog in the house he stayed in; that at the end of a hard journey he'd come home to a pet who'd become a companion, a living representative of the love of God he sought so diligently to communicate to others.

If we can learn to see the animals with whom we come into contact –  
The ones we invite into our homes, and the ones we don't;  
The ones we pass along our ways, the cute ones and the scary ones –  
If we can learn to see them as representatives of God's love and provision,  
we will see God all the time. And we will know the blessing of animals.

Amen.

**THE GOSPEL**

Mathew 6:25-29

'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.