

THE BLESSING OF ANIMALS

In Genesis 1:25, we are told that "God make the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good." This was on the sixth day, the same day that God created man. In fact, the animals were the last thing that God created before man. And God gave man "dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (Genesis 1:28) When God prepared to send the flood, He instructed Noah to build an ark big enough not only for his family but also for a male and female of each animal and bird "to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth." (Genesis 7:3) From the beginning, man has had the responsibility for the care and protection of all other living beings.

Perhaps no one is more closely associated with man's stewardship over the animals than Francis of Assisi. He was born in the northern Italian town of Assisi and was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant. In his youth he was extravagant and carefree, a troubadour and knight-at-arms. But on a pilgrimage to Rome, he impulsively exchanged his rich attire for a beggar's grimy garb. When he returned to Assisi, he began to steal cloth from his father's warehouse and sell it to repair a church. When his father took Francis to the Bishop and disinherited him, because he believed him mad, Francis happily removed the clothes he was wearing and gave them back to his father. The bishop then gave the naked Francis the rough brown tunic of his gardener; this was the origin of the distinctive Franciscan habit. Francis departed, singing. He had found his True Love, "My Lady Poverty," as he called her. With a band that grew to 5,000 over the next fifteen years, he wandered the countryside, begging and preaching.

Francis, unquestionably a man of God, was very much in touch with and at peace with all of God's creation. When a wolf was terrifying an entire village, Francis made a peace treaty with it. He also preached to the birds. In 1225, he composed his *Canticle of Brother Sun*. This is a hymn of praise of the Divine revelation in nature. It says, in part, "Be thou praised, my Lord, with all thy creatures, above all Brother Sun."

In honor of St. Francis and in recognition of the importance of our pets, part of God's creation, St. Peter's by-the-Sea Episcopal Church will conduct a Blessing of the Animals this Sunday at 10:00A.M. in the churchyard. Everyone is invited to bring their pets for a blessing. A reception for All God's Creatures will be held afterwards.

The Rev. Bert Eaton is Rector of St. Peter's by-the-Sea Episcopal Church , located at 503 W. Broad St. in Swansboro.