



"The Amazing Creatures of Our Planet"
Scripture – Genesis 1:20-31
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, November 14, 2021

Two months ago, a 13 year-old Wisconsin boy named Briar was given the task of watching his four younger sisters while his mother and father ran to the grocery. The parents had been out of the house only 10 minutes when the children began to smell smoke. Somehow, the playpen had caught fire. Briar acted swiftly. He rushed his sisters out of the house and to the safety of the yard.

Briar dashed back into the house and grabbed a fire extinguisher to try to save their home. However, the flames were more than he could handle. The house quickly filled with smoke to the point he could not see or breathe. On the verge of collapsing, he felt his dog, Mandy, rub up against his leg. Briar grabbed her by the collar and Mandy led him out of the inferno.

The parents pulled up just as Briar and Mandy stumbled out of the house. They stood in shock as their house went up in flames; but Briar had saved his sisters and the family dog had saved Briar.¹

The bond between humans and animals is an ancient one. Many scientists believe that humans began domesticating dogs as many as 30,000 years ago. Today, the unique relationship between people and their pets is unmistakable. Pets possess an amazing power to enrich our well-being.

A woman comes home after a long and stressful workday, exhausted and ready to collapse on the couch. But, when she turns the handle and walks through the front door, her dog comes running because the most INCREDIBLE PERSON IN THE ENTIRE WORLD is home! Life is good! His tail wags, he barks with joy, and he plasters her with kisses. She kneels to pet him and peers into his sparkling eyes. Immediately her spirits lift and the day's grind fades.

Perhaps you have endured a zoom meeting that has dragged beyond two hours. Your eyes are glazing over when suddenly your cat leaps into your lap. Your pet pulls you out of the sterile screen – at least momentarily – as you are touching and being touched by a flesh and blood creature. You gently stroke your furry feline and she purrs with delight. The tension in your neck relaxes and your emotions switch from irritation to: "Awwww." How many zoom meetings have been lightened when someone's pet suddenly appears on screen?

Pet owners develop amazing bonds with their pets and pets can become fierce protectors of their owners. Just a week ago in Birkenhead, England, Lorraine Scott, took her three-year-old German Shepherd for a walk shortly before sunrise. As they walked along the beach, she spotted a blond-haired man dressed in solid black stalking

her. He scanned the area, did not see another person and began coming toward her. She said, "At that point, I started to get panicky and I just froze." The situation could have turned ugly, but as the man was advancing, her dog bared his teeth and barked ferociously. The stalker turned and ran.

Today's passage reminds us that not only does God create, but God gave us the enormous assignment of being in charge of life on planet earth. After creating the natural world and the living creatures, God created human beings. And God said, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish, the birds and every living thing." Regrettably, far too many people throughout history have seized upon these words as a license to plunder the earth. The passage warrants no such thing.

Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann points out that the dominion we are to exercise is like "the dominance of a shepherd who cares for, tends and feeds his animals...the task of 'dominion' has nothing to do with exploitation and abuse. It has everything to do with securing the well-being of every other creature and bringing the promise of each to full fruition...Moreover, a Christian understanding of dominion must be in harmony with the way of Jesus. The one who rules is the one who serves. Lordship means servanthood...[Humans are commanded] to rule over the creation for its well-being and enhancement."²

Long before humans came to be, God brought forth other living creatures that swim, fly, crawl, and walk – fish, birds, reptiles, and land animals. Over time, humans came to understand that animals were not only something for our individual well-being, but that we are responsible for their care. As the most powerful species and the brightest species (but not always) the survival and thriving of animals is up to us. We are to care for God's creation by being good stewards of its resources – especially its living creatures – both the ones who are domesticated and the ones who live in forests, jungles, and mountains. Lions and tigers and bears; oh, my.

However, as we know, humans not only care for animals, they also care for us. Five weeks ago in Albany, New York, police were called to a home where a teenage girl was intending to jump from the roof of the three-story residence. The police tried to talk her down, but she wouldn't budge. However, during the conversation, the officers learned that she loved dogs. One of the officers brought their new therapy dog – a Goldendoodle – to meet her. The six-month-old dog coaxed the girl away from the edge and the officers were able to pull her to safety.³

Numerous studies have been conducted on the human/animal bond that demonstrate the various ways we benefit. Petting an animal has been shown to reduce stress, lower blood pressure, and increase dopamine and serotonin levels in the brain. Pets can help the fitness of their owners, who might otherwise be sedentary, by getting them up and moving. Pets reduce an owner's isolation by opening the door to interaction with neighbors and other pet lovers. Some dogs can alert their epileptic owner of an impending seizure. Some service dogs help people who are blind to navigate their environment, while "psychiatric service dogs assist individuals with disabilities such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and schizophrenia."⁴ Ask Sue and Jerry Spilecki about Rudy and Archie and how these wonderfully trained dogs have brought joy to patients in hospitals and peace to first responders following a catastrophe.

Sadie is a 100 pound German Shepherd who had a bad history with men. That's why three animal shelters would not accept her. But Brian Myers adopted her, thinking he could work with her and help her overcome her issues. In his mind, he was saving her.

One night Brian had a stroke. He lives alone and as he climbed out of bed, he collapsed onto the floor. He was wedged between the side of his bed and the wall. His cell phone was 15 feet away. Sadie was his only hope. She

came to him and he grabbed her collar. She dragged him across the room to his phone where he was able to call 911.⁵

Pets often become very much a part of one's family. They become like your child – only they don't talk back, require an allowance or ask for the car keys! Our Director of Facilities, Paul Crothamel, and his wife, Fran, can tell you about the love they have given and received from their horses over the years.

Camilla and I have a friend who never married and has no children. However, she loves her little dog as much as any parent loves her child. Her dog provides her with the opportunity to give and to receive love. The two are constantly communicating with each other.

It is vital to human health to have someone or some living creature to care for. Extending love to another makes us more human.

I sometimes wonder if God created dogs to give us an ideal model of forgiveness. You can forget to feed your dog, refuse to take it out for a walk, and neglect it in any number of ways, and it will come back to you wagging its tail and showing you affection. If we were as grace-filled as dogs, our world would surely be a far more peaceful place.

If you want insight into a person's character and psychological condition, observe the way they treat animals. Do they love and care for their pet or do they try to control it with a heavy hand, shouting commands and yanking at its leash? Beware of the person who vents his fury on defenseless animals. Their internals are askew. Proverbs 12:10 says, "The righteous know the needs of their animals, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel."

One night when he was deep into the world of dream, New Testament professor David Rhoads, had a vision he will never forget. He dreamt he was seated in the first pew in a spacious cathedral and a priest was serving the Lord's Supper. Worshipers had come forward to the chancel and were kneeling at a communion rail. The priest was handing bread to the first person. Rhoads gazed at the next person at the rail and was shocked to see a snake. It was curled on the floor, its neck was stretched out over the rail and its head was straining forward to receive the sacrament. Next to the snake was another person. Next was a raccoon with its paws on the communion rail awaiting the bread of life. Then he spotted a bird standing on the railing eating bread crumbs.

As he looked around the sanctuary, the walls of the church fell away and outside was an enchanting forest with all types of wild animals roaming around. He said it felt as if walls of separation had vanished and there was a seamless web of all creation praising God.

Ever since that dream, he has never viewed worship the same way. He now sees all of earth as the sanctuary in which we worship and where we are profoundly connected with all of life – with land, water, sky, people, and the living creatures of our planet. May we embrace such a vision and become the trustworthy stewards God intends for us to be.

NOTES

1. WCCO staff, "Teen saves 4 sisters from house fire then dog saves him," www.wdbj7.com/2021/09/14/teen-saves-4-sisters-house-fire-then-dog-saves-him/, September 14, 2021.
2. Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), pgs. 32-33.
3. News staff, "Therapy Dog Saves Teen's Life in Albany," TimesUnion.com, October 8, 2021.
4. Jen Karetnick, "Service Dogs 101—Everything You Need to Know," *The American Kennel Club*, September 24, 2019.
5. CBS Evening News, February 26, 2021.
6. David Rhoads, "Blessing of All the Animals," creationjustice.org.