

The first scripture we read from the Old Testament book of Isaiah lays out a vision of the peaceable kingdom. A world in which animals of various kind live together in harmony. In looking to the animals overcoming their hostilities, the prophet Isaiah gives us guidance that we should strive to overcome our differences as humans as well.

The second Scripture we will be reading will be the 148th Psalm. This is a psalm of creation in which the author invites all the earth to give praise to God. This will include the animals of the land, sea, and sky. All the creatures are invited to see God's glory. Let us listen to our next reading from Psalm 148.

Read Psalm 148

Last year I invited folks to share about how their animal came into their lives. I am going to invite you to do that as well this morning. You are being invited to share anything that you would like to share about how you acquired your animal or anything unique about your animal.

The two animals that we have in the McGregor household are both rescues. Our cat, Maggie, was found by a friend of James on the soccer fields at Manchester Park in Rock Hill. Maggie was brought home to live with the Ross family, but the mom discovered that she had allergies to the cat. A Facebook post was made, and Maggie found herself in our home where she has now lived for 4 years.

Our dog Sunny is also a rescue. He was originally found along the side of Lake Wylie Rd. near the intersection of Hwy 49 and 274. He is now 14 years old and is showing the early stages of dementia. He is now on medication to address his mental illness. We still walk for over 30 minutes every morning before the sun comes up.

Who else would be willing to share about how your animal came into your family or something unique about your animal?

So why are we having a worship service in the gym today and why have we brought out animals? We can thank St. Francis of Assisi for that. St. Francis is the patron saint of animals and the ecology. The current pope, Pope Francis, takes his name from St. Francis because of his concern for the poor.

Francis was a wild young man, but he had a conversion experience in which he renounced the wealth of his family. He dedicated himself to poverty, obedience, patience, and humility and others began to follow him. In the year 1209, Francis was given permission by Pope Innocence III to start a new religious order. Today we know that religious order as the Franciscans.

Francis was one who showed his love of God by caring for those who were stricken with leprosy. Lepers were shunned by most, but Francis showed them love and concern. Francis tried unsuccessfully to negotiate peace between Christians and Muslims during the 5th Crusade.

In 1224 St. Francis was the first saint in history to receive the stigmata. Stigmata is when the palms of one's hands become bloodied for no cause. It is a sign of a blessing to remind one of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

In 1990, Pope John Paul II shared the following words about Francis in a speech he gave for the World Day of Peace. I think John Paul's words from 1990 have something to say to us today. The Pope said this in 1990:

"I would like to address directly my brothers and sisters in the Church, to remind them of their serious obligation to care for all of creation. The commitment of believers to a healthy environment for everyone stems directly from their belief in God the Creator, from their recognition of the effects of original and personal sin, and from the certainty of having been redeemed by Christ. "

The pope continued by saying, "Respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation, which is called to join men and women in praising God." The pope cited Psalm 148 for these words.

And then the pope said this. "In 1979, I proclaimed Saint Francis of Assisi as the heavenly Patron of those who promote ecology. Francis offers Christians an example of genuine and deep respect for the integrity of creation. As a friend of the poor who was loved by God's creatures, Saint Francis invited all of creation—animals, plants, natural forces, even Brother Sun and Sister Moon—to give honor and praise to the Lord.

The poor man of Assisi gives us striking witness that when we are at peace with God we are better able to devote ourselves to building up that peace with all creation which is inseparable from peace among all peoples."

The pope then offered this challenge. "It is my hope that the inspiration of Saint Francis will help us to keep ever alive a sense of 'fraternity' with all those good and beautiful things which Almighty God has created. And may God remind us of our serious obligation to respect and watch over them with care, in light of that greater and higher fraternity that exists within the human family."

So today we gather to give worship to God. We recognize our responsibility as caretakers of God's creatures. We recognize our responsibility to care for all of God's Creation.

We offer blessing upon the creatures that God has made, and we affirm our commitment to care for them as God challenges us to do. AMEN.

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--from Pope John Paul II, *Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace: Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation*, 1 January 1990, paragraph 16.

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