

John Sampson
"Helpers and Keepers"
Text: Psalm 121
Preached at KVCC
October 20, 2019

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

As you all know, later this afternoon our church will be hosting a blessing of the animals, which is the first time we'll be doing this since I've been the pastor here. I'm really looking forward to it. I think it's going to be fun, and I hope as many of you who can participate will.

This tradition of blessing animals comes from our Catholic brothers and sisters, and is tied to a man named Francis, who lived in an Italian town called Assisi back in the 12th century. I think many of you are familiar with Francis. We've said together his Canticle to Brother Sun and Sister Moon here in worship. He's also the man who's credited with creating the first Christmas crèche.

Francis was born into a wealthy and powerful family, but gave it all up to follow a life of poverty and service to God, and to his neighbors, and to Creation. It's in memory of Francis' commitment to serving God's non-human children, and revealing their sanctity to all of humanity, that later today we'll be blessing the animals that bless our lives.

Because I imagine there may be some howling, and some meowing, and some growling, and some wiggling bodies who aren't necessarily pleased to be in collars among strange new people and animals, I won't be giving much of a meditation during this afternoon's blessing. So I'm going to do it now. I'm going to use this moment to reflect upon the sanctity of non-human life, and how God has imagined our human relationship to it.

Some of you may remember back earlier this summer when I shared a reflection on the opening creation story, the story where God creates everything that exists over the course of six days. On the sixth day God creates humanity and gives us dominion over all of the animals of the lands, and seas, and air. And I shared with all who were present that day that in Latin the word for dominion comes from the word "dominus," which means power, and command, and rule. And if we take this word "dominus" one step back, to see where it comes from we come to the word "domus," which means house. The power of the "dominus" is the power of the father, or patriarch, over his household.

And I said that what I thought was missing from the way we usually think about dominion is the love that a father shows his family, that many fathers, I'd like to think almost all

fathers, don't simply lord their power over their spouses and children, but engage with their families in love and compassion. I like to think that almost all fathers seek to nurture and protect all of the members of their households. I shared in that reflection that I thought this was the right way to understand what God had in mind when she granted humanity dominion over her new and good creation. She asked us to take care of it, to nurture it, and to love it, and not simply use it to satiate our own desires and physical needs.

You see when God gave us dominion over her Creation God made us, made you and me, the "dominus" of her world. Dominus can be translated as dominion, but it can also be translated as Lord. God made us Lords over the earth, made us Lords over the animals of the sea, and sky, and land. If the animals could talk, they would call us dominus, or Lord.

But this word dominus doesn't only occur in Genesis. It occurs throughout the Psalm we just read. Did you hear it? Over and over again the writer of this Psalm addressed the Lord. Over and over again the writer of the Psalm told us about the roles and responsibilities of what it means to be a Lord. Over and over again the singer of this hymn told us how they understood their relationship to this Lord.

Ok. That's the set-up. It took me a bit to get here, but now let's have some fun. Let's perform an act of glorious confusion.

What if we took this Psalm, on this day when we celebrate the vision and service of Francis, a man who gave up everything so he could better minister to all of God's children – human and non-human - on this day when we will be blessing the animals we love and live with, and what if we sing again this Psalm from their perspective.

What if we retell this Psalm, and instead of imagining that when we say Lord we are referring to God, and we instead imagine that the animals are addressing us, their "dominus", their Lord. What if we retell this Psalm and instead of speaking to God, we listen to the animals and what they are telling us about them and ourselves.

Here it goes!

I, maybe I am a cat or a dog, or a dolphin or an ant. I am one of God's sacred children and I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?

Because I need help. Everyday there's a little less of my world – a little less habitant, a little less food, a little less clean water. Everyday there's a little bit more pollution, and there are a few more people moving into my land, and there are fewer places to raise my pups.

So I look up, and I'm looking at you, and my looking up is a psalm or hymn asking for your help.

Because my help needs to come from the Lord, from the one who God called dominus, from you, from humanity. You have been created to help me, to love me, to nurture me, to raise me in your embrace like a father would raise his own children.

I look up to you because I hope that you will not let my paw, or my hoof, be moved. Don't let me stumble, and if I do pick me up and let me get back on my feet.

You were created to keep me; this is the whole reason you're here; it's your job 24/7. I need someone to watch over me as I sleep, and dream.

You keep my whole world – don't fall asleep on duty. You're too important to ever stop caring for this world, for all of the places I hunt, and play, the lands I use to migrate through during all the seasons. Never sleep in your duty, in the role that God gave you.

You, Lord, human one, are my keeper – you need to keep me, and all of those like me, safe. Instead of ruining this wonderful earth, you are called to preserve it and to keep all of creation out of harm's way. You are here to serve me in all of my awesome diversity.

Please Lord, please human one, keep the coming in and going out of my life, and the lives of all of my brothers and sisters who live on land, and in the seas, and in the air safe so that we can prosper from this time on and forevermore, just as God intended it in the beginning.

Amen.

What we hear in this Psalm, retold from the perspective of the creatures of our world is that we have a deep responsibility to them, to their care, and to their future, and that this responsibility isn't just a good thing, or the right thing to do. It doesn't even operate on the level of a requirement understood as a way to preserve humanity from our own decline.

This responsibility, revealed to us through the singing of a Psalm with meowing, and barking, and howling, is a call to remember, or perhaps to even imagine for the first time, that we are created to love and care for this world, our common and shared home. It's why we're here as a species. It's why God made us, and gave us dominion, and elevated us to be Lords over all of God's other children.

Our lordship is not a blank check that allows us to use our non-human brothers and sisters for our own pleasure and desire. It doesn't give us the right to destroy the animals of our world as if they were worthless toys, and amusements. Our lordship is an invitation to take on a ministry to serve and humble ourselves before those who God called good, and who God asks us to see not just as good, but as very good.

This is why we will bless the animals in our lives later today. And this is why we are already blessed by them, day after day. year in and year out

Amen.