



“We Are Not Alone”

Text: Genesis 1:28

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

If you are visiting with us this morning, or if this is your first experience of a service for “The Blessing of the Animals,” a few words of introduction are in order. This service has been held at First Pres annually for over 20 years. It was part of the custody agreement we made when Wendy and I came here as co-pastors. We were called as the pastors of this congregation, but with that call came “The Blessing of the Animals.” They were grandfathered into the deal.

The service itself is part of the celebration of the Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi. The actual feast day of St. Francis is October 4th every year. But, that date quite often coincides with the Sunday when we celebrate World Communion, so we have moved the “Blessing of the Animals” to the last Sunday of September.

St. Francis was known to celebrate the evidence of God in creation. His famous prayer, which is the heart of our opening hymn, “All Creatures of Our God and King,” speaks to his witness that everything in the created order bears witness to God and God’s first work of creation.

And that is really why we celebrate this service. At least once a year, we intentionally remind ourselves of the opening words of the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth...” We celebrate the Creator. We celebrate the creation. And we are reminded of our responsibility as stewards of creation.

God created the world with a sense of balance. The interconnectedness of everything in the world is something everyone is beginning to experience and understand. But that was not always the case.

There was a time when we humans thought that the world was ours to do with as we pleased. We heard the Biblical mandate:

“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth
subdue it; and have dominion
over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and
over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

And that’s what we did. We interpreted “have dominion” as “do as you please.” And we did as we pleased with the soil, the air, and water. Because there weren’t as many of us, and because we lived in less concentrated communities, there wasn’t too much damage.

But then we got “fruitful and multiplied” and there were more people, but the same amount of earth. Things got crowded. Things got congested. Things got smoky and grimy. Things got depleted. Some things even became extinct. In fact, in North America alone, since the time of the founding of the nation in 1776, thousands of species of mammals, reptiles, birds, and amphibians have disappeared completely, not to mention trees and flowers and some kinds of grass, nor mention the loss of irreplaceable minerals from the soil, nor mention the waters that have been poisoned and made non-potable.

The Bible’s use of the word “dominion” is not a license to do-as-we-please. The word means to be stewards – managers – wise overseers of what God has created. The web of life is as fragile as a spider’s web, and when we are less than careful, the web is torn. Sometimes it can be repaired. Sometimes it is gone forever.

When we live selfishly, without regard to how much we use and how easily it is replaced, we “threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.”¹ When we pay little or no attention to our rate of consumption, we exploit and despoil the creation and mock the Creator. When we over-consume the planet and its resources, we place ourselves in undeniable jeopardy.

But, every now and again, we can go back and heal the brokenness we created. I’ve included in the bulletin a link to a video you can watch on the web. It is a presentation of what happened when, in 1995, wolves – which had been extinct – were reintroduced in Yellowstone National Park. Wolves had been the apex predator, but they were hunted to extinction within the park’s boundaries. What happened since then, no one could have expected.

When the wolves were reintroduced, deer avoided some of the areas of the park where they had frequented. When the deer left, plants began to grow in those areas. Aspen and willow trees began to reappear. That really got things moving!

The trees and bushes brought more berries and more bugs. Various bird species began returning to the park. Increased tree population brought back other species of birds.

Beaver – also previously extinct within the park – returned. The beavers dammed the rivers and that attracted otters, muskrats, and various species of reptiles.

The wolves killed the coyotes. The mice and rabbit population grew. That attracted foxes, weasels, badgers, and hawks. The population of bald eagles began to grow.

And then, the wolves changed the rivers. That's sounds strange. But with a better balance between prey and predator, other species began to thrive. Increased vegetation decreased erosion along the rivers. The river banks stabilized. The rivers narrowed. More pools formed. Rivers stayed more fixed in their courses.

The wolves not only brought new balance to the Yellowstone ecosystem, they changed the park's physical geography.

Why am I telling you all of that? Because it teaches us that it is never too late to move the creation toward wholeness. This creation of God's delight, broken though it may be, can be restored.

But it means that we will have to see the creation as a fragile web, of which we are only a part. We are not alone in creation. We are part of this interconnected web of life and we are the only ones in that web with the power to affect significant change. We are the only ones who can clean the soil, the air, and the water. We are the only ones who can protect the viability of every species of animal and every species of plant. We are the only ones who can do anything about the scientifically proven disaster which is climate change.

And for us, as God's stewards of creation, it is not just a survival matter, it is also a spiritual matter. As God's people, we have been charged by God to care for the creation. It is no different than any of the Ten Commandments, or any of the other laws and commandments God has given us. Care and proper stewardship of the planet is not an option for one who believes in God. Full stop.

We are not alone on this planet. We are surrounded by other living beings. And we have a responsibility to them.

But, more importantly, we have a responsibility to God. It is our obligation to preserve, protect, heal, and care for this world of God's making. The care of the earth – and all its creatures and plants – is holy work, given to us by our God.

We are not alone. We are but a part of a much larger web than we care to see.

We are not alone. And when such a calling to repair and care for the broken creation seems an impossibility, remember these words, attributed to St. Francis:

Start by doing what's necessary;
then do what's possible;
and suddenly you are doing the impossible.²

Give thanks to God for the gift of creation! And give yourself to its continued care and healing. For now and evermore. Amen.

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- 1) line 38, *A Brief Statement of Faith*, Presbyterian Church (USA)
 - 2) http://www.searchquotes.com/search/St_Francis_The_Environment/1/#ixzz4tZF5IvUz



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