

“PRAISE GOD ALL CREATURES”
Sermon by the Reverend Daniel C. Thomas, Jr.
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean, VA
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Texts: Genesis 1:20-31; Psalm 150

Today’s scripture readings are from Genesis 1 and from Psalm 150, a triumphant psalm of praise to God. The word, “*Genesis*” means “*In the Beginning*” and the entire book is about beginnings from the beginnings of the universe, to the beginnings of conflict, sin and judgment among the human race, to the beginnings of a people chosen by God, the people of Israel.

Most scholars assert that the Creation story in Genesis One was written by the “P” or Priestly writer in the sixth century during the time of the exile. It is addressed to the exiles and is an attempt to refute Babylonian theology that their gods are lords of the future. The Priestly writer insists that God of Israel is the only true God, and He, Yahweh is not only the lord of history but the Lord of all life.

To claim that God is Lord of all life and Creator of the universe is a declaration of faith. Thus, Chapter One is not first and foremost a scientific treatise about how the world began. It is rather a confession or affirmation of faith. Note as we read about the fifth and sixth days of Creation how God creates by the mere power of God’s Word. Notice too how God celebrates and rejoices in the goodness of ALL that God has created.¹ *Read Genesis 1:20-31 and Psalm 150.*

Starting tomorrow, Immanuel will be experiencing a “*Galactic Blast!*”² In fact, all next week at Vacation Bible School we are going to have a “*cosmic adventure praising God.*” Our all-school memory verse is Psalm 150:6, “*Let everything that breathes praise the Lord.*” To encourage this theme of exuberant praise, each day the children will be introduced to a Praise Phrase. Whenever they hear the daily praise statement about God, they are encouraged to respond, “***Praise God!***” The five statements are:

Our God is wonderful!	Praise God!
Our God is Incredible!	Praise God!
Our God is Amazing!	Praise God!
Our God is Magnificent!	Praise God!
Our God is Awesome!	Praise God!

The first day’s story for VBS is the story of Creation. And in looking over the storyteller’s script, I noticed that it gives special focus to the multitude of animals God created on both the fifth and sixth days of Creation. It reminded me of part of a faith statement of one of our Confirmands in which the Confirmand wrote,

“One thing I do not believe is that God made us in his image. I do not believe that if God chose a form it would be human. Many do not realize the fact that we are not the only creatures made by God. We have separated ourselves from the animals in the creation story by saying God made us in a day and sculpted us in his image. I believe that if God took the form of any of his creations, he would be a horse, proud and strong.”

What’s your initial reaction to this statement? I must confess that my initial reaction was negative. The faith affirmation that human beings are made in the image of God is one of the bedrock

tenets of my faith. It affirms to me that we as human beings, unique of all God's creatures, have been given the precious ability to establish a personal relationship our Creator; to have the freedom to communicate with our God and to come to know and love God in a deeply intimate and abiding way. But upon further reflection, I realized this confirmand's position had merit. This was reinforced when I read last week in Job for the Year of the Bible this verse of scripture,

*“Ask the animals and they will teach you,
the birds of the air, and they will tell you.”*
- Job 12:7

So I invite you to consider with me what the animals can teach us about God, our world, and about ourselves that can move us to extol God in praise?

First, the animals can help us humbly identify with and celebrate our common **creatureliness** with all God's creatures.³ As this confirmand rightly pointed out, we are not the only creature created by God. In fact, I think it is highly significant to note that we are not the only creature created by God on the Sixth day of creation. We share this day of creation with all the land animals, and especially with the mammals to which class we as Homo sapiens belong. Moreover, God's divine blessing and declaration of goodness is applied to every living thing, it is not the sole province of human beings. This informs me that God is not solely preoccupied with the human race. While we are the height of creation, this creation story affirms that God values **all his creatures** and calls us to value all of them as well. The great 9th Century Celtic theologian, Eriugena, declared that in every creature there is a theophany of God - that all God's creatures help us affirm the central goodness of our own creatureliness.⁴ As I read the other day in a children's book entitled, Where Can I Find God?, *“There is something of God in all God's creatures.”*⁵ I believe that this is true and that in studying the animals of creation we can become more aware and more deeply appreciate of our own creatureliness. We can come to realize that we, as human creatures are wonderfully made and wonderfully valued by our Creator, and can be moved to say, **Our God is wonderful! Praise God!**

Second, animals can remind us of the incredible **creativity of God**. Many of you are aware that Sue and I have been eagerly awaiting the birth of our first grandchild. At 7:46 p.m. on Thursday evening, our daughter Sarah gave birth to Hannah Claire Pagels, 19 inches long and weighing in at 6 lbs. and 11 ounces. And she is gorgeous! Both mother and daughter are doing great and we are ecstatic. So often when a baby is born, we hear comments like, “She has her mother's eyes or her father's ears” (*I hope Hannah doesn't have my ears!*). I've often wanted to respond, *“No, the baby has her own eyes and ears, her own special features. She is unique. She is one of a kind!”* And praise God that each of us is unique. And yet (and yet) does not our uniqueness pale in comparison to the incredible variety of creatures that God has created - from birds that fly, reptiles that crawl, to fish that swim and mammals that walk and run. What a menagerie of different and marvelous creatures!

I recently read in the 40th anniversary issue of Smithsonian Magazine that more spectacular species of animals are turning up every day, and that by 2050 just in terms of mammals, biologists will have discovered 2000 new species worldwide.⁶ Now, I fully believe in evolution, but I also believe that the divine spark that gives life to each and every creature is a blessed gift from God. Each of these newly discovered species speaks to God's on-going creativity and to a world that is alive and full of possibilities because God has declared life good and still sustains this world by his grace. God, the animals remind us, is an astoundingly creative divine being, and so we are moved to declare that **Our God is Incredible! Praise God!**

Third, animals can remind us of how much God **delights in us**. One of the things I find most attractive about Celtic Spirituality is its conviction of the essential goodness of the entire creation. The

earth, matter, flesh are not opposed to God nor do they hamper the spiritual life. Rather they are blessed gifts from God that foster and contribute to spiritual growth and well-being. In reality, all of life is a glorious expression of God... and God delights in all his creation.⁷

Leo Buscaglia, in his book, Bus 9 to Paradise, points out that Americans own around one trillion pets. Not one billion but one trillion!⁸ Why? A key reason is that pets with their beauty, personalities, playfulness and especially their unconditional love bring us joyous delight; they give life perspective by reminding us of the lighter and brighter side of life. I, myself, cannot count the times our dog, Snickers, brought me untold joy by excitedly greeting me at the door and inviting me to join him in play after a long and demanding day. As the cartoon character Snoopy reminds us, "*Dog is God spelled backward.*" There has to be a spiritual truth in this phrase somewhere! I choose to believe it is in the affirmation that like our pets, God delights in us and joyfully shares with us his love and grace. Yes, **Our God is Amazing! Praise God!**

Fourth, animals remind us of both the **sacredness and vulnerability** of life. Who of us has not winced at seeing on the television pelicans and other shore birds so full of oil they can no longer fly, or of a sea turtle being vigorously washed by human hands to clean its shell of the toxic properties of petroleum. The effects of the BP Oil Spill, now in its 104th day, on the Gulf and on its precious eco system we are told could last for years if not decades. It serves, I believe, as a visual reminder that this earth needs to be considered by we humans as holy ground, and that the earth is home not only for us, but for all of earth's creatures. The blessing of dominion that God promised to the human race in this Genesis 1 Creation account should not be one of brutal or exploitive domination. God intended our dominion to be that of a shepherd, of one that calls forth a reverence for all of life and encourages a caretaking, even nurturing roles toward each and every one of God's beloved creatures.⁹ Our world, with all its creatures both great and small should serve as a constant reminder that this earth is a magnificent gift which we should cherish and treat with reverence and respect. This earth declares for those with ears to hear that **Our God is magnificent. Praise God!**

Fifth, animals call upon us to **praise God in song**. One of my children's favorite VBS songs when they were young was entitled, "*A Place in the Choir.*" The refrain goes,

*All God's critters have a place in the choir,
Some sing low, some sing higher,
Some sing out loud on the telephone line
And some just clap their hands, their paws,
or anything they got now.¹⁰*

Truly God's critters sing an unbroken song of praise to their Creator, which even if at times sounds noisy, is certainly more pleasing than the man-made noise made by those Vuvuzelas blown constantly at the World Soccer matches in South Africa this summer. Even more to the point is what Diana Butler Bass reminds us in her book, A People's History of Christianity, "*More than anything Christianity is a love song*"¹¹, a song you and I are invited to sing.

That is why the hymns of our faith are so important. Faith is like music, it is a song of praise to be sung, and hymns enable us to express and celebrate our faith in ways that words alone, even prayer alone, can never accomplish.

So let me close with one practical suggestion. You will be introduced this Fall to a 50th Anniversary Covenant adopted by the Session. One of its challenges is for all of us to sing 50 hymns during our anniversary year. For most of us that is a pretty easy goal. But let me deepen this goal a little

bit by challenging you to not only sing 50 hymns but intentionally study the words of some of these hymns and consider and ponder the insightful theology contained within them. And then let me even be so bold as to encourage you to memorize at least the first verse of these fifty hymns so that when we sing them in worship, or when the spirit moves you or us, we can sing them aloud with passion and gusto and declare for all to hear that **Our God is Awesome! Praise God!**

This table of our Lord is a fitting place for us to enter into such a song of praise. For it is at this table as we eat of the good things of creation, we are reminded in a powerfully visual way of just how loving God truly is and how wonderful is the love song our Christian faith can sing. For all God's critters, including us, have a place in the choir of faith and are invited to joyfully celebrate the goodness of our Creator. Indeed as the psalmist proclaims, "*Let everything that breathes praise the Lord.*" **PRAISE GOD!**

Amen.

Daniel C. Thomas, Jr.

SOURCES USED:

¹Background on Genesis:

Brueggemann, Walter, Genesis, John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1982.

The New Interpreters Bible, Vol. 1, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994

The Interpreters Bible, Vol. 1, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1952

² Cokesbury VBS 2010, *Galactic Blast: A Cosmic Adventure Praising God*, Abingdon Press, Nashville. 2010.

³ Newell, J. Philip, The Book of Creation: An Introduction to Celtic Spirituality, Paulist Press, Mahwah, N.J. 1999. Chapter 5 on "*The Fifth Day: The Creatureliness of God*" served in large part as the inspiration for this sermon.

⁴ *ibid.*, p.72

⁵ Doss, Helen, *Where Can I Find God?* Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tenn., 1968. Pages are not numbered.

⁶ The Smithsonian: 40th Anniversary Issue, July/August 2010, Vol. 4, Number 4, Smithsonian Enterprises, Washington, D.C., pp. 50-52.

⁷ Newell, The Book of Creation.

⁸ Buscaglia, Leo, Bus 9 to Paradise, edited by Daniel Kimber, William Morrow and Company, New York, N.Y., 1986, Chapter on "*Passion for Plants and Animals.*"

⁹ Brueggemann, Walter. Genesis, p.32

¹⁰ "*A Place in the Choir*", words and music by Bill Staines, Mineral River Music, 1978

¹¹ Bass, Diana Butler, A People's History of Christianity, Harper Collins, New York, N.Y., 2009, p.31.