

ALL DOGS GO TO HEAVEN...OR DO THEY? SERMON INSPIRED BY  
SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI  
SUNDAY, MAY 17, 2015  
First Presbyterian Church  
Marianna, Florida  
Ted W. Land, Interim Pastor

This morning's sermon is inspired by Saint Francis of Assisi. Saint Francis is indeed the patron saint of the birds and animals, and stories, legends, told about him include his preaching to "our sisters, the birds," baptizing a wolf, and convincing the dogs of the village not to threaten that newly converted and baptized wolf.

I think it highly appropriate to bless animals. They certainly bless our lives. I know that when my wife, Polly, was a teenager, an old dog named Spider was her best friend and confidant, and her guardian. He actually ran me up the apple tree one night, when I was trying to kiss her good night! Of course, the fact that I stepped on his tail may have had something to do with that!

Over the forty plus years Polly and I have been married, there have been three or four dogs and a few horses than I can name that have blessed our lives. There was one cat, known as Lucky, short for Lucky to be Alive, which adopted me, and blessed me with her presence, and blessed us all with the presents she left on the gas grill, things like birds and snakes and squirrels and moles that she has killed and wanted us to cook!

If only in the rich memories and funny stories they've left behind, our animals have blessed our family life, and I know the same is true for many of you sitting here in these pews today.

We love our animals, and we want to keep them with us always. The questions of whether animals have souls, and whether there will be animals in heaven, have been asked of me many times over the forty odd years of my ministry.

An elderly lady in my first pastorate asked if I would conduct a funeral for her beloved dog, Terry, when the end came. I agreed to do so, but both she and Terry out-lived my tenure in that church.

Not too many years ago, a young lady in the Arcadia church came to me, crushed, because her teacher in school had told her that dogs didn't have souls, and that there would be no dogs in heaven. She had just lost a beloved pet, and was bereft at the thought that that sweet friend might not be in heaven to greet her when she arrived there.

In my final year in that pastorate, I prayed with two darling little girls when their beloved pet, a female dog named Frank, died.

A little girl once wrote Billy Graham a letter in which she asked, "Will my dog who died this week be in heaven?"

His reply was, "If it would make you any happier, then, yes, he will be. Animals aren't nearly as valuable as people, but God is their maker and has touched many people's lives through them. It would be simple for Him to recreate a pet in heaven. I see no reason to believe he wouldn't if it would bring his children pleasure."

Pope John Paul II was asked a similar question in a public audience in 1990, and replied that "...animals possess a soul and men must love and feel solidarity with our smaller brethren." The Pope went on to say, "Animals have the breath of life and were given it by God. In this respect, man created by the hand of God is identical with all living creatures...The existence therefore of all living creatures depends on the living spirit/breath of God that not only creates but also sustains and renews the face of the earth."

Pope Francis, who took his papal name from the one who is the patron saint of animals, quoted John Paul II a few months ago, in affirming that there is indeed a place for pets in the kingdom of heaven.

For the most part, the scriptures are silent about dogs and cats and other pets. When they are referred to, it is often in a negative way. Indeed, most references to animals in scripture do little to inform us of their future. But we do know that all were created by God, and that God's plan for the future is the redemption of all creation, a literal "new heaven and a new earth."

Martin Luther was convinced that when Paul wrote about all creation moaning in travail, waiting for redemption, it included all creatures. He said to his little dachshund, which had lost his tail to a slamming door, "In the resurrection, thou shalt have a tail of gold."

Morgan Roberts, retired pastor of the Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, published a book of sermons, entitled *Horses in Heaven*. His conclusion was that in heaven, all that is required to make us happy, content, to give us pleasure, to insure perfection, will be there. And if that means horses, or dogs, or cats, then that will be the case.

The presence of horses in heaven was embraced by C.S. Lewis, who wrote in *Miracles* that our heavenly bodies would be as different from our earthly bodies as the ponies children ride are from magnificent steeds that are even now awaiting us in heaven's stables.

Lewis staked a claim for more animals than horses in heaven, as he depicted the last judgment in the final volume of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, entitled *The Last Battle*.

There, as the old heaven and the old earth and being destroyed, the entrance to the new heaven and the new earth is through a stable. And as the animals flee before the destruction, those who run to the stable are saved, and those who do not seek the safety of the stable perish.

Of course, the stable was the birthplace of Jesus, and the legend of the animals bowing down to Him is one of the wonderful traditions of Christmas. Many is the child who has crept into a barn on Christmas Eve, to see if the animals do indeed bow down, or if they are given the gift of speech, as another tradition has it.

Born in a stable, Jesus showed a remarkable rapport with the colt, the young donkey, upon which He made the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

And of course, there must be horses in heaven if Jesus and His armies are going to return mounted on white horses.

But what of dogs?

Robert Louis Stevenson saw it this way: "You think dogs will not be in heaven? I tell you, they will be there long before any of us."

James Thurber wrote, "If I have any beliefs about immortality, it is that certain dogs I have know will go to heaven, and very, very few persons."

Mark Twain had a couple of comments: "Heaven goes by favour. If it went by merit, you would stay out and your dog would go in." In a letter in 1899, he wrote of one canine, "This dog is a gentleman: I hope to go to his heaven, not man's."

That's right in line with what Will Rogers had to say.

The Oklahoma cowboy/philosopher said, "If there are no dogs in heaven, then when I die, I want to go where they went."

Poet Richard C. Call wrote,

"Can't find God in the usual places...  
Churches, books, or preachers' faces?  
Keep on searching and don't give up.  
You may just find Him in the eyes of a pup."

The 19<sup>th</sup> century French poet and dramatist Theophile Gautier, also recognized the soulful eyes of our canine companions, and wrote, "Sometimes he sits at your feet looking into your face with an expression so gentle and caressing that the depth of his gaze startles you. Who can believe that there is no soul behind those luminous eyes?"

I long ago concluded that not all dogs go to heaven, but the good ones should.

And most dogs are good: the bad ones were probably made that way by bad people.

Dogs are loving and forgiving. Dogs are faithful and true. Cats, horses, cows, all kinds of animals, reveal God's love, God's blessings, God's bounty to us.

One final thought, from Randy Alcorn:

"Would God take away from us in heaven what he gave, for delight and companionship and help, to Adam and Eve in Eden? Would he revoke his earlier decision to put animals with man, and under man's care? If he remakes the New Earth with new men, (who look very much like the old men, only perfect), wouldn't we expect him also to make new animals (who will presumably look like the old animals, only perfect)?"

There was a movie several years ago with the title, "All Dogs Go to Heaven," and you have seen the "dueling signboards" outside of two churches that argued the question.

We believe in the communion of the saints, and I'm sure that some of God's saints have four legs, and bark and wag their tails. Let us give thanks for God's creatures which have blessed our lives and who will be with us in the kingdom of heaven.