
Where the Wild Things Are

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The Feast of St. Francis**

*Praise the Lord from the earth,
you sea-monsters and all deeps . . .
Wild beasts and all cattle . . .
—Psalm 148: 7, 10a*

I have only known one actual wild beast. His name was Nelson, and he was a Jack Russell terrier. One Easter, Nelson jumped up and grabbed an entire leg of lamb off the kitchen counter, then scarfed it down in five gulps. One December, he drank preservative laced water out of the Christmas tree stand and had to go to the vet to have his stomach pumped. Then there was the night before my father's funeral. We had a house full of guests who had come to pay their respects, eat country ham biscuits, and drink scotch. Never one to miss a party, Nelson somehow broke free from his crate, raced into the living room and ran laps around the crowd of mourners with—I kid you not—a pair of women's underwear on his head.

I always remember Nelson on the Feast of St. Francis—no offense to our current dog, Scout, who is out there somewhere in the congregation today—no offense to Scout, but I think that of all the pets I have had in my life, Nelson was the one who most embodied the spirit of St. Francis.

This may sound strange, given how Francis is usually portrayed as this peaceful, Zen sort of guy, one who spent most of his life in quiet gardens, meditating beside babbling brooks, dressed in a kind of burlap caftan, balancing several dozen birds on his arms, and being kind to the poor.

Turns out, though, this is only half of Francis' story. That's right—for all the paintings and mosaics of him gently feeding sheep, cattle, and squirrels, for all his prayers about being an instrument of God's peace, Francis was apparently something of a wild man. Legend has it, he did all sorts of outrageous things. Things like taking off all his clothes in the town square as a way of announcing his commitment to a life of poverty. Things like running up to a leper and kissing him. Things like preaching in his underwear (Good thing Nelson wasn't around or he might have been preaching in the buff!).

Francis of Assisi was no cardboard saint. He was a real “down and dirty” human being, which is probably one reason he is so beloved. Francis was a man who was not put off by the messiness of this world, nor by his own messiness, nor even by the messiness of God. Yes—the messiness of God. A God who, in Jesus, does all sorts of wild, crazy, disorderly things, like hanging out with tax collectors and prostitutes, healing on the Sabbath, and turning pagan foreigners into the heroes of his stories. A God who, as this morning's psalm assures us, accepts the praises not just of lush fruit trees and verdant hills but also of sea-monsters, fire and hail, and wild beasts.

You know, one of the great things about the Feast of St. Francis is that it reminds us that wildness and chaos are part of creation, that very creation that God has pronounced profoundly good. So often in our world, we focus on trying to tame the things and people that seem out of control, the situations in life that strike us as unruly and unmanageable. We tend to love the neat and the orderly, which is why we can have such a hard time with the parts of creation—and the parts of ourselves—that don't fit readily into that tidy box.

But today is a day—in the words of a beloved children's book—today is a day for remembering where the wild

things are. Today is a day for remembering that the wild things are very close to the heart of God. God delights in God's whole creation—even the parts you and I may find useless, disgusting, shameful, offensive, even dangerous. For me, that includes virtually all reptiles as well as the dreadful flying cockroaches that were a prominent feature of my childhood in the Piney Woods of Mississippi. For the youngest among us, it likely includes abhorrent things like broccoli, Brussels sprouts, and green beans, crabs that pinch our toes at the beach, and the darkness whose nightly descent means it's time for bed. For those of us who are older, it includes things like painful joints when there's a shift in the barometric pressure and having less hair on our heads than in our ears and noses.

Above all, though, it includes us. God's delight in God's whole creation includes us. It includes us in all our fumbles and foibles and contradictions and catastrophes. In our failed attempts—despite our best efforts—to love our family and friends and neighbors as we intend. In our distaste for people who think or look or live differently than we do. In our neglect of this fragile earth, our island home. In the wild beasts than roam around inside us and sometimes find their way out of us in embarrassing and very public ways.

St. Francis' Day reminds us that we can bring all of this—our whole selves, the parts we are proud of and the parts we'd rather hide behind the sofa—we can bring all of this to God without shame and without fear. God does not snub us because we have rough edges. Just as we love our pets who never seem to come when called, who steal our food and vomit all over our expensive Persian rugs, so God loves us in our messiness, too.

On this St. Francis' Day, then, praise God in his holiness. But also praise God in your humanity. Praise God all you who have come to church this day feeling healthy and strong, and praise God, you who have hobbled here after barely making it out of bed. Praise God, you jellyfish that sting and you Cockapoos that cuddle; you cats haughtily arching your back and you Golden Retrievers rolling over for a belly rub while your house is being robbed. Praise God, you pets sitting obediently in your pews this morning and praise God, you who are about to lift your leg and wee wee right in the middle of the aisle. Praise God, you glorious green spaces in this "City in a Forest," and praise God, you neighborhoods that most view as nothing more than boarded up, concrete wastelands. Praise God you well spoken and flawlessly dressed, and praise God, you who make your home on the streets, rarely take a bath, and sometimes mutter strange gibberish. Praise God, you straight A students and those of you just barely scraping by. Praise God, you Atlanta Braves when your bats swing in victory and when they are stilled in defeat. Praise God! Praise God, all of you and all of this wacky and wondrous world and the vast expanse of interstellar space. You are fearfully and wonderfully made! You are the apple of God's eye. You bring God immense pleasure simply because you exist. May you know yourself to be held lovingly within God's embrace, which, indeed, is exactly where the wild things are. Amen.