

**Sermon Preached December 24/25, 2014
Year B, Christmas Eve/Day
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury**

Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the whole earth. Amen.

It is reported that when a dog thinks to himself he says: 'Hey, these people I live with feed me, love me, provide me with a nice warm, dry house, pet me and take good care of me ... THEY MUST BE GODS!' While a cat thinks: 'Hey, these people I live with feed me, love me, provide me with a nice warm, dry house, pet me and take good care of me ... I MUST BE A GOD!'

I love cats and dogs and have shared my life with both over the years. They have a perspective on life which I envy. They have the capacity to love without hesitation, to seek affection, to relax, and to live in the moment. These are qualities worth emulating.

In fact, animals as a whole are a glorious addition to our existence!

When we hear the nativity story, it does not specifically mention animals, except for the “flocks” of the shepherds, yet our crèche scenes abound with cows, donkeys, sheep, and camels. Animals are an integral part of Christmas Eve.

If you’ve ever seen the Brit-wit Christmas movie “Love Actually” there is a cute scene where a mother asks her young daughter: “So what’s this big news, then?” Her daughter says excitedly, “We’ve been given our parts in the nativity play. And I’m the lobster.” Mother: “The lobster?” Daughter: “Yeah!” Mother: “In the nativity play?” Daughter: [beaming] “Yeah, *first* lobster.” Mother: “There was more than one lobster present at the birth of Jesus?” Daughter: “Duh.”

The assumption of the presence of animals at the nativity is an important part of the story. We imagine them delighted with the birth of our Savior.

At the same time, many Christians also assume that the salvation Jesus brings involves whisking good souls away from all this nasty earthly mess and taking us to a spiritual heaven. I can't imagine the sheep and lobsters would be terribly excited about a Jesus who did **that**. If salvation means hating the flesh and loving the spirit, discarding the animals and earth, why did God create that which is physical, the donkeys and manger? If salvation means, in the words of the theologian Brian McLaren, "an evacuation plan" to rescue our souls from the physical, then why does God the spirit take on flesh, and enter into the physical? The incarnation forces us to rethink the meaning of salvation.

Perhaps the physical is part of the plan? Perhaps the donkeys have salvific value? In the beginning of the Bible, Genesis states that the Spirit was present at, and a part of, the Creation. That from the beginning all of the material world has been infused with the Spirit. That in some way our existence, by its very nature, is a balance between spirit and flesh, between heaven and earth.

That non-physical God had an important and divine reason for making us physical, yet also incorporated within our physical selves a spark of the eternal. Physical and spiritual are two sides of the same coin. In the words of the theologian Richard Rohr, “Matter always reveals Spirit, and Spirit lies hidden in all that is physical, material, earthly, human, flawed, and failing. Everything is a sacrament!”

But somewhere along the way we’ve upset the balance. When considering salvation we focus on only human spirituality and not our physicality. When considering our day to day life we focus only on the human physical world and not our spirituality. In both we discount the physicality and spirituality of the rest of creation. This creates separation and disconnect.

The mountains, the oceans, the sky, our pets, the tomatoes in your garden, they too are part of the creation over which the Spirit moved at the beginning. They too are part of God’s sacred plan. But we have failed to see the Spirit in them, in each other, and often in ourselves.

By discounting the connection between spiritual and physical in the entirety of creation, we become ignorant of what holds us all together. Discounting our connectedness, causes conflict, injustice, and evil. But with the incarnation of Jesus, our eyes are opened.

With the birth of Jesus, perfect balance between spiritual and physical is achieved. The result being a life of perfect love, for all of creation. In Psalm 96 it says “Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the whole earth.” In the hymn “Joy to the World,” we rejoice, “Let heaven and nature sing!” In the Lord’s Prayer we say, “On earth as it is in heaven.” Salvation is not just about humans souls. That is a small and myopic view. Salvation is about the realignment and balance of all earth and humans, physical and spiritual, in love. It allows us to see God in all things, and then live accordingly.

In the words of McLaren, salvation “is not an evacuation plan for heaven but a transformation plan for humanity on earth.”¹ Baby Jesus born in a stable is God coming to physical earth to show us how this is done.

Our cats and dogs rejoice in the birth of Jesus, along with the lobsters and the oceans, because when humanity gets its act together, there are fabulous implications for the rest of creation as well. [Romans 8:19-23]

There is a Native American proverb which says, When a person dies and goes to heaven there is a gate which leads into heaven, at that gate stands every animal that person has ever encountered in their life time. Based on each person’s actions, each animal decides which people can walk through the gate and which will be turned away.²

Presumably those who have been made into a steak dinner will
forgive us!

¹ <http://www.calvarymemphis.org/mclaren>

² More: <http://fortheloveofthedogblog.com/article/dog-writing-poetry/an-indian-legends-heaven>

Just recently even Pope Francis said, “One day, we will see our animals again in the eternity of Christ. Paradise is open to all of God’s creatures.”

Among other things, the incarnation reminds us that how we treat the physical creation, including animals and all the earth, is important. The donkeys and sheep in the stable are also jubilant. Salvation allows us to see God in all things and then live accordingly. God entered our world, underscored our connectedness, and modeled for us the path of love.

I will end with the closing lines of a poem by Madeleine L’Engle, entitled “Most Amazing Word.”

“Merry Christmas! Wonderous day!

Maker of the universe,

You the end, & you the source

Come to share in human clay

And, yourself, to show the Way.”

Amen.