

Blessing of the Animals on the Feast of St. Francis Reading: Lamentations 1:1-6
By the Rev. Karen Faye Siegfriedt; St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Atascadero CA 10/5/25 Year C

It is a touching moment for me to gather together with you each year to bless your pets and celebrate your love for them, in spite of all the challenges, the costs, and the commitment required. Thank you for witnessing your compassionate love for each other and to these precious creatures of God gathered before us.

I would like to begin this sermon with two stories that relate to our "Creation Care" Celebration. The first story is about a seal being hunted by a pod of killer whales: "When out of nowhere, two humpback whales rush in, trumpeting, massive, and seemingly determined to stop the kill. This isn't a fluke. In a study of 115 documented cases, scientists observed humpbacks confronting orcas during hunts – and in nearly 90% of those cases, the humpbacks disrupted the attack. Even more surprising? Many of the animals they protected weren't even their own kind. Seals, Sea lions, Gray whale calves, even sunfish. The humpbacks showed up, placed themselves between predator and prey, used their massive fins to shield the victims, and sometimes physically lifted them out of the water.

And then? They left. No food. No reward. No obvious benefit. Some scientists believe this behavior started as a protective instinct – evolved to defend their own calves – and is now being applied to any creature in distress. Others think it may point to complex social awareness or empathy in humpbacks, something we're only beginning to understand. As one researcher put it: "It's almost as if humpbacks just don't like bullies."

These whales have even been seen traveling long distances just to intervene. One report described humpbacks swimming for hours to reach a killer whale attack, only to chase the orcas off and then disappear into the deep again. Are these acts of instinct, emotion, or something we can't yet explain? We don't know. But in a world where survival often means silence, the humpback's defiance is loud, deliberate, and extraordinary." (National Geographic 2023)

The second story involves a 12-year-old girl in Ethiopia who was kidnapped by men who planned to force her into marriage. "She had been missing for nearly a week, and her family feared the worst. But when the police finally located her, they were stunned to find an extraordinary scene, three wild lions were standing guard over the frightened girl.

The lions had not harmed her; instead, they had chased off her captors and remained by her side, protecting her until help arrived. Once the police reached the location, the lions calmly walked away, disappearing into the wilderness. This unbelievable act of protection left both authorities and locals astonished.

Experts speculate that the girl's cries might have sounded like a lion cub in distress, prompting the lions to respond with empathy. Regardless of the reason, the incident has sparked widespread awe and admiration, showcasing a rare moment of compassion from nature itself.

The story has since become a powerful symbol of how wild creatures can sometimes show more humanity than humans themselves. It serves as a reminder of the mysteries and wonders of the animal kingdom, and how even in the wildest places, unexpected guardians can emerge when hope seems lost."

These stories express an extraordinary love between different species of animals. They are reminders of our own call to be good stewards of the many creatures God has entrusted to our care, not just those we like or those that look like us.

It goes without saying that not all is well in our animal kingdom today. Within the last 500 years, human activity has forced more than 800 species into extinction. In the UK alone,

nearly half of the country's wildlife and plant species have been lost since the Industrial Revolution. 16,000 species of animals worldwide are now on the brink of extinction, all of which could disappear from the earth within decades. It is time for us to lament and act.

Today's reading from the Book of Lamentations reminds us of what can happen when greed, hatred, and misuse of power take precedence over justice and compassion for all of God's people. Let's take a closer look at the first reading from Lamentations: "How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become." This is a poetic lament mourning the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BCE. The city of Jerusalem is personified as a grieving woman, abandoned and mourning her lost children, her splendor turned to sorrow. This lament is not only about the physical destruction of Jerusalem but also about the spiritual and communal consequences of turning away from God's ways of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. The opening verse sets the tone of this powerful lament: "How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become."

Lamentations is not just an historical record about a tragic event in the past, but rather it is a mirror for every generation. It is both a warning and an invitation for us to be honest about our lives, our communities, our laws, our budgets, and our leadership. Are we caring for the vulnerable? Are we honest about our failings, both personal and collective? Do we seek reconciliation and justice? Are we willing to lament, to confess our sins, and to hope? How can we better care for mother earth and for our animal brothers and sisters?

An analogy can be made between the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE and the destruction of our lands and wildlife in this century. Today's lament can be seen as an invitation to examine our role regarding the loss of species resulting from human activity. This includes deforestation, habitat destruction, air and water pollution, and climate change. Recognizing and lamenting this destruction can be a first step toward repentance and action as we seek to honor God's creation and restore what has been broken. The warnings of Lamentations must not lead us into despair but rather to a deeper sense of faith and hope. The kind of hope I am referring to is the hope that Jane Goodall offered to the world as she worked tirelessly for global conservation efforts.

Jane Goodall was an anthropologist who just died a few days ago at the age of 91. She was the world's leading expert on chimpanzees. In one of her final interviews, she said: "Think about our ecological footprint. The key thing is to realize that every day on this planet, you make a difference, and if you start thinking about the consequences of the small choices you make -- What you buy? Where did it come from? How was it made? Was there child slave labor [involved]? Did it help the environment? Would you eat it if it didn't involve cruelty to animals? -- you start thinking like that, and millions of people around the world thinking like that, then we start to get the kind of world that we cannot be too embarrassed to leave to our children."

So today as we bless our pets, let us also commit ourselves to follow in the footsteps of compassion shown to us by Jane Goodall and St. Francis. "Blessed are you, Lord God, maker of all living creatures. You called forth fish in the sea, birds in the air and animals on the land. You inspired Saint Francis to call all of them his brothers and sisters. We ask you now to fill us with compassion for all the creatures of the earth. By the power of your love, enable them to live according to your plan. May we always praise you for all your beauty in creation. Amen."