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## *Sermon for St. Francis Day*

**A Sermon by the Rev. Bill Harkins**

**Feast of St. Francis**

**Genesis 2:18-24**

**Matthew 11:25-30**

*In the Name of the God of Creation who loves us all, Amen.*

Good morning and welcome to the Cathedral of St. Philip as we celebrate the Feast Day of St. Francis, a day on which we give thanks for God's creation, and everything in it, and we bless many of our companions in this sacred space. And, they bless us as well. A few years ago my ordination brother Thee and I were on the hill at the Horseshoe Drive entrance to the Cathedral for the "drive by blessings" after the 11:15 service. It was an unusually warm day, and at about 1 p.m. we were preparing to head inside when a lone woman leading four dogs on leashes slowly made her way up the driveway. Thee was engaged in blessing the ashes of a dog named "Wags," whose owner was still grieving. The woman arrived atop the Cathedral Close breathing heavily. "I almost didn't come today," she said. "I live in Snellville... and it's a long way to drive. But this is my family. These are all rescue dogs," she explained, patting each one in turn, lovingly, saying their names. One was blind another had been thrown out of a car on Hwy#78, and barely survived. "It's been a hard year for me too," she said, tearfully. "I lost my husband, and my home. These dogs are all I have left, but we do have each other, and I am so very grateful for that. I guess the truth is we all need a blessing. "Maybe," she said, "we bless each other along the way. Maybe those blessings are how God continues to be present in our lives." Indeed, and this is one of the ways God's Creation continues to unfold, right here, right now, every moment.

In her wonderful novel, "Gilead," the author Marilynne Robinson tells the story of Rev. John Ames, a dying Presbyterian minister writing to his young son, so that he will remember his story long after he is gone. The book takes the form of an extended letter, really, and is itself a blessing of gratitude, and the generosity borne of gratitude. In one passage he recalls blessing a cat in his early days as a young pastor. This memory leads to an especially lovely passage:

I still remember how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. It stays in the mind. For years we would wonder what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them. It still seems to me to be a real question. There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time.

What wonderful writing this is, in an equally wonderful book, holding together as it does what I believe to be the deeply connected threads in today's thematic tapestry of *blessing and gratitude*. And, what is more, there is in this tapestry an abiding appreciation for the mystery of creation, and our place in it, and the connections between each aspect of that creation. We are each called to bless creation through our acknowledgement of it, and to feel the power of this acknowledgement""this blessing""pass through us. Indeed, Robinson's sense of wonder at the cosmic nature of this blessing, this intentional experience of the mystery of creation, is spot on theologically. As Matthew's Gospel suggests, this

combination of deep blessing, of acknowledgement of the mysterious connectivity and multiplicity of the Incarnation, and the gratitude that comes of it, inspires a lightness of being""a lightness of load""that is a relief to weary souls.

When and where have you taken the time to acknowledge, name, and bless the mystery of creation and your place in it? Do your stories about these experiences serve to move beyond the divides that would create divisions between us and our place in creation, and the ongoing unfolding of God's Incarnational mystery? How might our telling stories of our experiences of Divine generosity, complexity, and mystery energize the ancient stories""like the one we read from Genesis just now? Does it matter when we take time to listen, to abide, to pay attention to the presence of God all around us?

In his wonderful book "The Embers and the Stars," Erazim Kohak asks this very question of each of us, and of himself. To speak of the incoercible presence of God in the context of nature""and of the creatures who live in it, may at first glance seem challenging, he suggests. "Nature appears dead to us in part because we have come to thinking of God as "super-natural," absent from nature and not found therein." This is, he suggests, a product of how far our quest for theory has deviated from the reality of lived experience or, to put it in Marilynne Robinson's words, how we often miss the connection between blessing, and the acknowledgement of the sacred in creation. Kohak continues, "The most basic trait of the world that confronts a dweller in the forest clearing is that it is God's world, not man's, and that here God is never far. In lived experience, in the embers and the stars, the heavens declare God's glory, the creatures of the forest obey God's law, the human dweller gives thanks for his grace."

It just happens that Kohak has found deep meaning in the worship of the Anglican communion, and the Episcopal version of it, where he finds what he refers to as "the great mystery of abiding, its sense, its incarnation, love becoming actual in labor, faith in life and worship." And in the metaphor of an evening in the New Hampshire woods he finds that our blessing such experiences, in this moment, does not lead to a conclusion, but to a reflection on the living presence of God. Robinson sees the sacred in the mystery of blessing the life of a cat, Kohak in the river, and the forest, and the stars, where, he writes, "the fulfillment of time is not where we seek it in vain, in its endless future. It is where we find it, in its perennially present eternity." So, where does your sense of wonder at the mystery of creation energize the ancient and ever unfolding stories of creation? Where and when do you bless the sacred in the now, enlarging and co-creating the ongoing unfolding of that narrative?

The astrophysicist Dr. John Gribbin has written a book called "Stardust," in which he makes compelling connections between the stuff of our very DNA and the products of supernova explosions. Most days, I enjoy the online Astronomy picture of the day, from NASA by way of Cal-Tech. It reminds me of the cosmic connections between Marilynne Robinson's cat blessing, and the Incarnational mystery of Kohak's embers and stars. Both connect me to the sacredness of creation here, and now. In her magnificent book of constructive theology, Catherine Keller evokes the relational plenitude of the contracting of God and universe into one another, and the radical interrelatedness of all creatures. Along the way, she connects the maternal floods of primordial chaos to the swirling interdependencies of our lives as embodied, *interpretive* beings. As the poet Mary Oliver has suggested our instructions for living a life are to "*pay attention, be astonished, and tell about it*".

We are called dear one's to co-participate in the ongoing unfolding of the Genesis story by adding *our stories* of creation to that one, in conversation with the compassionate movement of the Holy Spirit. The ongoing unfolding of creation requires our participation. It asks of us that we tell what we have seen of God's ever-in-process creation, woven into the stories of who""and whose we are, and are becoming. And so, one recalls with gratitude and wonder the blessing of the mysterious raven""a bird I have come to refer to as Labrador retrievers with feathers, on Heliotrope Ridge in the North Cascades who, out of sheer curiosity and mischief, relieved me of a camp spoon, laughing as he took the prize back to his lair; of the magnificent writing of John McPhee, whose work has opened up to me the deep mystery of geology, and whom we read aloud while driving through the Great Basin of Wyoming as he told of the massive Eocene lake that was once there ; one remembers the regal mother moose and her child who paused as we paddled down the swollen Allagash River one stunning Maine morning in May, lifting their heads as we passed by, reverently, in gratitude; One remembers the humpbacked whale in Tebenkof Bay, Alaska, framed by my brother Thee in his kayak, held gracefully in wonder; And one recalls the dog who mysteriously followed our son and his girlfriend home two years ago, as they were walking near our neighborhood, a bright October day, not long after a time in which, in a six-week period, my mother died, my wife left town for a six-month interim appointment as a consultant, and our two dogs, both female, died within days of one another. "All of the women in my life are leaving," I plaintively said to Vicky over dinner in Louisville, where I had driven

to be with her. I knew she would come home, but I was lonely, and sad, and in my grief, refused to consider another dog. And yet, one day, there another dog appeared, wagging her tail, hungry, lost, with soft brown eyes and her ribs showing and no identification, no name we could call her. "Probably a stray now," said our vet, "so many people are abandoning foreclosed homes in the middle of the night, and leaving their pets behind." And into the broken spaces in my heart created by those losses, this affectionate, wise, creature of God appeared. And she helped me heal. Was there a blessing? Is it connected to gratitude? Do I know in a new way the power of *acknowledged* sacredness, and what Wendell Berry may have meant when he said; "***The incarnate word is with us, is still speaking, is present always, yet leaves no sign, but everything that is...***" Yes, yes, and yes. Amen.