

## *Oxen & Sparrows*

**Psalm 36: 5-10** But your loyal love, LORD, extends to the skies; your faithfulness reaches the clouds.

<sup>6</sup> Your righteousness is like the strongest mountains; your justice is like the deepest sea. LORD, **you save both humans and animals.** <sup>7</sup> Your faithful love is priceless, God! Humanity finds refuge in the shadow of your wings. <sup>8</sup> They feast on the bounty of your house; you let them drink from your river of pure joy.

<sup>9</sup> Within you is the spring of life. In your light, we see light. <sup>10</sup> Extend your faithful love to those who know you; extend your righteousness to those whose heart is right. (CEB)

**Jonah 4:10-11** But the LORD said, "You 'pitied' the shrub, for which you didn't work and which you didn't raise; it grew in a night and perished in a night. <sup>11</sup> Yet for my part, can't I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who can't tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (CEB)

**Matthew 6:26-29** Look at the birds in the sky. They don't sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you worth much more than they are? <sup>27</sup> Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life? <sup>28</sup> And why do you worry about clothes? Notice how the lilies in the field grow. They don't wear themselves out with work, and they don't spin cloth. <sup>29</sup> But I say to you that even Solomon in all of his splendor wasn't dressed like one of these. (CEB)

**Matthew 10:29** Aren't two sparrows sold for a small coin? But not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father knowing about it already. (CEB)

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Almost every Sunday we use a few verses from the Psalms to gather our hearts and minds and focus our attention on worshiping God. The sermon itself is seldom drawn primarily from the Psalm passage, and that's our loss. This past week, as I was looking at the passages of scripture suggested by the lectionary I was really struck by the Psalm reading. The more I thought about it, the more I remembered other scriptures that we've looked at over the past several years, passages that relate to today's reading from Psalm 36.

Perhaps you remember the quirky ending to the book of Jonah. There were many reluctant prophets, but Jonah really, really didn't like the message that God gave him to preach -and he really didn't want to deliver it. Rather than go to Nineveh, Jonah caught a ship sailing in the opposite direction. It took a terrible storm that threatened to sink the ship and kill everybody to get Jonah to admit what he had done. He was thrown overboard in an effort to save the ship – which worked – and then he was swallowed by a fish. Three days later, the fish puked him up on the beach. By this time Jonah was ready to go to Nineveh, like he'd been told to begin with. So he went and told the Ninevites to repent as he instructed. Then, he got mad because they did repent, they changed their ways, and God didn't destroy the long standing enemy of Israel. And Jonah sulked about it. The book ends with God reminding Jonah who is in charge. God asked Jonah, ". . . can't I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who can't tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" God choose to pity people who were unfamiliar with the laws of God. And God choose to take pity on their animals. Apparently, the fate of the animals was part of what God took into account in deciding whether to smite or spare the city of Nineveh.

Some time back we spent several weeks studying the Sermon on the Mount, which is found in chapters five through seven in Matthew's gospel. Jesus talked about God's love for people and animals in chapter six in Matthew. Jesus said, "Look at the birds in the sky. They don't sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you worth much more than they are?" Jesus clearly says that we are worth more than birds. But that doesn't mean that birds have no worth in God's eyes. Later in chapter ten, Jesus taught, "Aren't two sparrows sold for a small coin? But not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father knowing about it" God feeds, sustains,

cares for small common birds like sparrows – and takes note of each one's death. Perhaps this scripture was the reason why my father sternly forbid me from shooting birds when he gave me a BB gun, the famous genuine wood stock, lever action, Red Ryder model. Over and over he impressed on me that targets were for target practice and to never shoot at birds.

I began to think about other scriptures that speak about our attitudes toward animals. I remembered hearing Deuteronomy 25, Verse 4, "Don't muzzle an ox while it is threshing grain." The funny thing is, I think I usually heard this verse used metaphorically by preachers who were hinting for an increase in pay! "Here I am," they would infer, "working so hard in the Lord's vineyard, "and I'm not getting fed by the folks who are benefiting from all of my effort to save their souls and bring them to Christ! You're muzzling the ox as it threshes the grain!" My memory is that some of those preachers were as dull as an ox, but it's not very kind of me to remember them like that. At any rate, we shouldn't overlook the way the animal in this passage is to be treated. Don't keep the ox from eating while it works. The ox must be fed even as it makes food for the farmer to eat. How insensitive it would be to force an animal to thresh out grain, to see and smell food that it needs, and to be muzzled so that it can't eat. That would be more than irony. It would be cruelty.

Other passages came to mind: the lyrical story of creation in Genesis, with God's affirmation about how good it is at every stage and regarding every part of creation. God declared it good, but we're prone to revising nature in whatever way suits us at the moment. If it results in extinction of whole species to feed our demand for resources, food, or profit in the short term, we often give it little thought. We overlook the interconnectedness of life that makes us interdependent on other species, on plants and animals alike, even on life at the microscopic level. Our very survival and prosperity is interwoven in a tight web of mutual dependence.

We've all heard John 3:16.. God so loved the world – the cosmos, is actually what it says. But we tend to hear it as God so loved people, especially people like me. But it isn't just about me, or you, or us. God so loved all of creation!

Back to today's reading from Psalm 36. There's this declaration in verse six that we could miss. It says, "LORD, you save both humans and animals." Save both humans and animals – that may not be a statement about whether dogs go to heaven. God the Creator cares for animal life along with the rest of creation. God's steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness and judgment enrich both animal and human life. God's love extends to all, God's protection is for all, and all are blessed by God's providential care. Not only does the rain fall on both the saint and the sinner, it also benefits both mankind and the animals. The life of man and beast alike depend on the Lord.

That God saves humans and animals alike is good news, but it also reminds us that we need to have reverence for all creatures – and their habitats. This needs to temper our relentless "development and progress." We act like our selfishness cannot be found out. This is partially out of pride – we think we are so smart! But it's also because we fail to even understand our sin.

Part of our difficulty is that we are too far from much of creation. We don't hear bird songs, we don't see the deer in the woods. We don't think about what we don't see. Then we fail to care simply because we don't think about creation in all of its beauty and interconnection. Nature films and trips to the zoo help in limited ways. It's still rather easy to make objects of animals and put a lot of emotional distance between our life and theirs. Many of us have pets. I think that's a good thing. I've certainly loved every cat and every dog who has been part of my life. But again, it's a limited relationship. An inherent part of the whole concept of a pet is that the animal adjusts far more to living with the human than the human does to living with the animal.

Just this past week, I was watching a program about the English estate where the series *Downton Abbey* is filmed. The real name of the elegant structure in that popular PBS series is Highclere Castle. The estate covers thousands of acres of woodlands, pastures, and tilled acreage. Among the staff is a deer slayer, the person whose duty it is to protect, preserve, and harvest the deer on the estate. His job is to see that the herds are healthy and have adequate forage and cover, and to provide venison for the

table. The man who has this full time responsibility remarked that he felt that a person was unsuitable for the position if they didn't have a strong feeling of respect, awe, and sorrow every time they killed a deer. I think his attitude may be more faithfully sound than most.

In the fall, many churches have a "blessing of the animals." For some, it's a way to remember the example of St. Francis of Assisi, who felt that it was our duty to protect and enjoy nature as the stewards of God's creation. St. Francis was right and scripture clearly supports that teaching. So, I've changed my mind about blessing animals. Sure, we can reduce it to some sort of sentimental affirmation of how much we love our pet. But at the end of every worship service we ask for God's blessings on our lives. Surely it's also appropriate to ask for God's blessings on the animals that God loves, and saves, just as we are saved by God's blessings.

That's what I've learned this past week. I pray that God's love for animals, as well as humans, will expand your understanding and trust in our God of everlasting love. If God loves oxen and sparrows, can we do anything less? Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,

Pray toward God with conscious gratitude for all the blessings God has given.

Like Jesus, like Paul, turn your eyes toward others with gentleness

Accept the *shalom* of God and rejoice!