

**Year B, Proper 22  
Oct. 7, 2018  
St. James, Wheat Ridge**

**By the Rev. Becky Jones**

So many things raised in our readings this morning.  
So many difficult, troubling things.  
We could explore, with Job,  
why bad things happen to good people.  
Or we could delve into Hebrews and the hierarchy  
of humans and angels.  
Or we could ponder Jesus's words on divorce,  
which is almost *never* a popular subject.

But you know what?  
My mind and heart is still wrapped around yesterday's  
Blessing of the Animals.  
That is always my very favorite service of the year,  
and I'm having difficulty setting it aside  
to dig into the difficult topics presented by our lessons this morning.

But there – there at the end of the Gospel -  
I think I spy something  
a little more amenable to my state of mind today.

Jesus said, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God  
As a little child will never enter it."  
So I'd like to talk about  
what it means  
to receive the Kingdom as a little child.

In fact, I'd like to ask all of you,  
regardless of your age,  
to put aside your "adulthood" for a few minutes  
and become a child again.

Choose to be an age  
where you're less concerned with the hard facts  
and more interested in the limitless possibilities of life.

An age where skepticism hasn't yet replaced wonder.  
And I want you to listen as that child might  
to some stories that I'm going to tell you.

They're stories about the man whose feast we observed yesterday  
when we blessed the animals.

That man was called Francis.  
He was born more than 800 years ago  
in a town in Italy called Assisi.

Now Francis was a very good man.  
He was so good that people called him a saint.  
There are many, many stories about Francis.  
Stories about how he was born rich, but gave away all he had to the poor.  
Stories about how he rebuilt tumble-down churches.  
Stories about how he even developed wounds on his hands and feet –  
just like Christ's - called stigmata.

But some of my favorite stories about Francis involve animals.  
He IS the patron saint of animals  
And for good reason.

Now, these stories I'm going to tell you are absolutely true.  
Even if they maybe didn't happen just this way.  
Because as children, we know that mere facts  
may be the least important part of some of the truest of true stories.

One day, Francis was traveling down the road  
and he spotted some birds flocking together just off the road.  
On a whim, he ran after them.  
But the birds did NOT fly away, as you'd expect birds to do.

Delighted, Francis asked them if they would stay awhile  
and listen to the Word of God.  
He said to them,  
“My brother and sister birds,  
you should praise and love your Creator.  
For God gave you feathers for clothes,  
wings to fly,  
and everything you need to be happy.

You don't have to reap or sow,  
yet God loves and protects you.”

At this, the birds began flapping their wings  
and praising God in song as only birds can do.  
Can you hear them singing in your mind?  
Can you feel their joy  
at realizing the abundance of God's care for them?

Francis walked right among them  
touching their little feathered heads.  
And he blessed all of them.  
But later, he wondered  
why he had never preached to the birds before.  
And from that day on,  
Francis always reminded the birds  
to praise and love their creator.

And this is why  
we frequently see statues of Francis  
surrounded by birds.

There's another story about Francis and a rabbit.  
One of his brother monks had caught the rabbit in a trap,  
and meant to eat it.  
But first, the monk brought the rabbit to Francis.  
Francis felt sorry for the little creature,  
and wouldn't permit it to be killed.  
He advised the rabbit to be more alert in the future,  
so it wouldn't get caught in any more traps.  
Then he released it and set it on its way.  
But the rabbit hopped back up onto Francis's lap.  
He set it down again, but it hopped right back in his lap again.

Can you just imagine how that rabbit felt?  
Its little heart must have been racing, (*BEAT CHEST*)  
It was trapped and doomed to die  
until this loving man set it free  
with words of reassurance and empowerment.  
Can you imagine yourself as that rabbit,

safe and protected in Francis's lap?  
Of course you wouldn't want to leave.

The most famous story about Francis  
involves a wolf  
who was terrorizing the people of the town of Gubbio.

This wolf was not only killing and eating livestock,  
it was attacking people too!  
The villagers were terrified of it.

So Francis and some of the bravest people in town  
set out to find the wolf.  
At last, they sniffed a musky scent in the air,  
and they knew the wolf must be close.  
Suddenly, the wolf came charging out of the woods at them,  
fangs bared, ready to attack.  
Francis made the sign of the cross,  
and the wolf slowed down, then stopped.

Francis called out,  
“Come to me Brother Wolf.  
In the name of Christ,  
I order you not to hurt anyone.”

And at that, the wolf lay down at Francis's feet.  
“Brother Wolf,” Francis said,  
“I want peace between you and the people of Gubbio.  
They won't hunt you anymore,  
but you must no longer harm them.  
All past crimes are to be forgiven.”

The wolf nodded in agreement.  
then stuck out its paw  
and put it in Francis's hand.  
Then Francis commanded the wolf  
to follow him into town.

Can you imagine how that wolf felt?  
He'd been called to account for his misdeeds,

but this gentle man hadn't mean to him.  
And so the wolf obeyed the command to follow.  
Somehow, he must've known  
that following this man would change everything.

By the time they got to the town square  
everyone was there to witness this miracle.  
With the wolf at his side,  
Francis told them all about the love of God,  
calling on them all to repent of their sins.

He offered them peace on behalf of the wolf.  
The townspeople promised to feed the wolf,  
if he would stop killing their livestock.  
The wolf lived for two more years among the townspeople,  
going from door to door for food,  
and those who had enough  
provided for him.  
He never hurt another person,  
or killed another animal.  
When the wolf finally died of old age  
the people of Gubbio mourned his death.

Now there are those who say  
that the stories about Saint Francis  
preaching to the birds,  
and interacting with the wild animals,  
aren't *literally* true.  
There are those who say the birds are metaphors for the poor,  
and the animals represent those on the margins of society:  
The sick, the mentally ill, the criminals...  
those whose voices aren't readily heard and understood by most people.

I don't know what the literal truth is.  
Part of me does SO want things to have happened  
just this way, with the animals.  
But is it any less miraculous if,  
rather than preaching to the birds,  
it was the poor who Saint Francis convinced  
to take joy in their circumstances?

Is it any less miraculous if, rather than a rabbit,  
it was frightened and vulnerable humans  
who felt the reassurance of God's love  
when in the presence of Saint Francis?

Is it any less miraculous if, rather than a wolf,  
it was a criminal who repented of his violence  
and stopped preying on the weak,  
and who came to find a home among God's people?

Jesus said, "Truly I tell you,  
whoever does not receive the kingdom of God  
as a little child  
will never enter it."

How did you feel when you were pretending to be the birds,  
singing for joy in praise of your Creator?

How did it feel to be the rabbit,  
huddled in the safety of a gentle and loving master?

How did it feel to be the wolf,  
repenting of your sins  
and finding no punishment at all,  
but only a life of abundance and blessing?

This is how a child receives the Kingdom of God,  
with a mind quick to imagine unseen possibilities...  
Unburdened by the need to deal with "what is,"  
and so, free to explore "what might be,"  
and absolutely able to enter an alternate reality.

We are the birds.  
We are the rabbit.  
We are the wolf.  
And as Christians, we follow a gentle Master  
who bids us enter the Kingdom,  
carried safely in his loving arms.

But there's more to it than that.

If we examine Jesus's words to us  
in this morning's gospel  
he elevates those at the bottom of the social ladder – children –  
into models for entering the Kingdom.  
Just as the stories of St. Francis elevate another unlikely group – animals –  
into models for entering the Kingdom.

Both call for radical hospitality  
toward those who are most oppressed in this world.

If we truly are to be like Jesus  
and like his beloved servant Francis  
maybe we should be asking ourselves...  
Who are those all around us  
that we've never thought to speak to,  
or share our blessings with?

Who are the defenseless in our midst  
who need us to be their advocate?

Who is the wolf in our midst  
with whom we must make peace?

And how do we set aside adult skepticism and disenchantment  
and allow ourselves once more  
to become as children  
to be lifted up in the arms of our savior  
and be blessed?  
Amen.