



Did Jesus Have Pets?

February 21, 2021: The First Sunday in Lent

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Oh Lord: Take our minds and think through them; take our mouths and speak through them; take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.

This may not sound like a very promising question with which to begin a sermon on the first Sunday in Lent. But I'm going to try.

I wonder if Jesus ever had a pet, growing up in Nazareth.

Pet cats and dogs and birds were definitely a thing in first century Rome, though usually more likely among the upper classes. There is evidence of domesticated dogs found in the archeological record in the ancient Near East where Jesus grew up.

It seems impossible that Jesus didn't have some kind of special rapport with animals. After all, according to tradition, he was born among cattle. It's likely that there were sheep and goats, maybe even a domesticated dog in Nazareth. He would have known that the 4th commandment requires Sabbath rest not only for people for farm animals like oxen, herding dogs, and horses. He says that foxes have dens and birds have their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. (Luke 9.58) He uses bird examples in his stories to describe God's character: "like a mother hen gathering her chicks" (Luke 13.34); and "God's eye is on the sparrow." (Matthew 6.26) He rode a donkey into Jerusalem (Mark 11.7-11); and the Book of Revelation seems to say that Jesus will ride in on a white stallion at the end of time (Revelation 19.11) And, of course, Jesus is the Good Shepherd. (John 10.11)

I ask this question because our Gospel passage today specifically says that in the midst of his testing in the wilderness, he was *with wild beasts*. Luke's and Matthew's Gospels say nothing about wild beasts. But Mark's does.

So, I wondered about that. What's going on between Jesus and the beasts in the wilderness?

I learned that there are actually two schools of interpretation about this question.

(Rolf Jacobsen on Sermon Brainwave, accessed 2021.2.15

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a8O2vdu2ymo&feature=youtu.be>)

One interpretation is that Jesus was threatened by the wild beasts. They were part of his struggle. They stand metaphorically for the hard questions with which Jesus wrestles; or, were, in fact, dangerous wild animals in the desolate place where Jesus struggled. There was plenty of rough and barren land around the Jordan. By Jesus' time, significant deforestation had already occurred. In addition to the presence of all kinds of snakes, there were other animals, since extinct, or very nearly so: the Asiatic lion, the Syrian bear and fox, the Judean desert leopard, the Mesopotamian deer, crocodiles, and even, amazingly, hippopotami. And lots of birds; Palestine is where Europe, Asia, and Africa meet, and hence an avian migratory highway. <https://www.penn.museum/sites/canaan/Climate%26Fauna.html>



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So that's the first interpretation: the wild beasts were very much present to Jesus, and they were mortal threat. And then there is the other school of interpretation: That the wild beasts were very much present with Jesus, but they were actually his *companions*.

Instead of seeking to have him for dinner, the wild beasts had him over for dinner, so to speak. With the angels, perhaps, waiting tables.

Think about it.

Just before he goes out to the desert, just after his Baptism, Jesus says "The Kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the Good News." (yes, this is the third time we have heard a segment of this passage in the last six weeks.) Maybe Jesus is inaugurating the Kingdom of God in the Judean wilderness with the wild beasts.

Let me explain. We know of the ancient Christian practice of understanding certain parts of the Hebrew Bible to be pointing toward the coming of Jesus. Remember this passage from Isaiah, chapter 11: "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him..... with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth...The wolf will live with the lamb; the leopard will lie down with the goat; the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

We may remember the 19th century painting by Edward Hicks entitled the "Peaceable Kingdom" that illustrates these verses. He painted over 60 different versions of it. There's one at the Worcester Art Museum, there's one at the Met in New York. Hicks paints a vision of this menagerie—with a cherubic Christ Child at the center.

So, rather than fending off ferocious lions and bears and snakes, Jesus began the in-breaking of the kingdom, right there in the wilderness, with the wild beasts, maybe even giving him comfort. He wasn't in danger; he came as a peacemaker, to make friends out of enemies. That is good news, indeed.

It is kind of a romantic view, a bit unrealistic. How would the natural world run, how would the great chain of being keep going, the cycle of life continues, if natural predators didn't keep killing and eating each other? I don't know. And yet, how many of us have seen the short movies that are everywhere on the internet of cats hugging dogs, or hens being cuddled by kitties. It seems not impossible.

I guess that's the point. The Kingdom of God seems unimaginable—until we get a glimpse of it.



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We'll notice that the human/animal relationship is important to God as well. In the Genesis passage this morning, God makes a covenant to never again destroy the earth, not only with Noah and the humans but with every living thing. God is done with cancel culture! Creation matters to God. God wants to be in relationship with all of it, forever, and wants the elements of Creation to be in right relationship with one another.

Perhaps some of you have seen the documentary called "My Octopus Teacher." In the film, a sad and broken man, a documentary film maker by trade, begins cold water, free-diving off the coast of South Africa. He meets an octopus, and for the next year, they clearly develop a profound connection, a real relationship that brings inner healing not only to the man, but to the relationship between the man and his son.

In the past couple of weeks, at Annual Meeting and the meeting of our freshly configured Vestry, people have shared their comfort and joy in connecting to God's natural world of birds and beasts. Someone noted the discovery of backyards as something to be celebrated during Covid time; another noted that a bird feeder had been put into the backyard for the first time, and birds were bringing joy, even drawing other members of the household previously ambivalent toward birds; in an exercise with the Vestry using paintings as ways to describe their relationship with God, a significant number chose images containing birds to characterize that relationship. Research shows that households' desires for pets, particularly for dogs, has skyrocketed during the pandemic.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/08/12/adoptions-dogs-coronavirus/>

In his farewell words in the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his grieving disciples, "I shall not leave you comfortless." (John 14.18) There are many ways that is true. We can imagine that whatever wilderness we inhabit, Jesus has somehow already been there. In the wilderness of the pandemic, our right relationship with the beauty of creation is a sign of the Good News of the Kingdom of God that Jesus brings. God gives us the beasts and birds and the created order to remind us of God's presence and provision; and so, we give thanks and praise to the One who created it all and is with us always.

Amen.