

**“ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL”**

**from Matthew 6**

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It is because of St. Francis of Assisi who lived from 1182-1226 that today in worship we celebrate the entire created world and our oneness with all of it, especially those others of God's creatures, both wild and domestic, with whom we share this beautiful and fragile planet. In his day, Francis and the brotherhood of monks he gathered around him, were seen as eccentric at best for their insistence that God cares as much for the birds of the air and the rabbits in the field as God cares for us. Today we consider St. Francis a visionary, one whose loving concern for all life points the way for all who would work to restore and save the earth.

There are wonderful stories told about St Francis and his interaction with the creatures of the world, beginning with a donkey. Francis and his brothers chose to live a life of poverty, with few possessions, one of which was a donkey. The original brothers shared a small, insubstantial hovel for their dwelling place. It is told by Francis's 13<sup>th</sup> century biographer, that when the weather was intemperate, the monks stayed outdoors. The donkey got the hovel!

Thomas of Celano, Francis's biographer, also tells us that Francis would often preach to the birds. In his words, it began when Father Francis and his companions were making a trip through the Spoleto Valley. Suddenly, Francis spotted a great number of birds of all varieties. There were doves, crows and all sorts of birds. Swept up in the moment, Francis left his friends in the road and ran after the birds, who patiently waited for him. Filled with awe, he 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 your Creator and always love him: He gave you feathers for clothes, wings to fly and all other things that you need. It is God who made you noble among all creatures, making your home in thin, pure air. Without sowing or reaping, you receive God's guidance and protection."

At this the birds began to spread their wings, stretch their necks and gaze at Francis, rejoicing and praising God in a wonderful way according to their nature. Francis then walked right through the middle of them, touching their heads and bodies with his tunic. Then he gave them his blessing, making the sign of the cross over them.

It is said that after that, he preached regularly not only to birds, but also to rabbits, fish, and deer. When he was out about the animals, they would all stop what they were doing, listen to the Saint, and not continue on their way until he had given them his blessing.

But the most famous of the Francis stories concerns a wolf that was terrorizing the town of Gubbio. This wolf was so hungry that it attacked and ate not only wild and farm animals, but also people. The townspeople organized a hunt for the creature, but all who were sent out after it were killed. Francis and one brave friar decided to take on the wolf. Armed with nothing but compassion, they left the city walls. Suddenly the wolf, jaws agape, charged out of the woods at the couple. Francis made the Sign of the Cross toward it and called out to the creature: "Come to me, Brother Wolf. In the name of Christ, I order you not to hurt anyone." At that moment the

wolf lowered its head and lay down at St. Francis' feet. "Brother Wolf," said Francis, "I want to make peace between you and the people of Gubbio. They will harm you no more and you must no longer harm them. All past crimes are to be forgiven." Then Francis commanded the wolf to follow him into town to make a peace pact with the townspeople.

By the time they got to the town square, everyone was there to witness the miracle. With the wolf at his side, Francis offered the townspeople peace, on behalf of the wolf. The townspeople promised in a loud voice to feed the wolf. Then Francis asked the wolf if he would live in peace under those terms. He bowed his head and placed his paw in Francis' hand as a sign of the pact.

The wolf lived for two years among the townspeople, going from door to door for food. It hurt no one and no one hurt it. Even the dogs did not bark at it. When the wolf finally died of old age, the people of Gubbio were sad. The wolf's peaceful ways had been a reminder to them of the holiness of St. Francis, a living symbol of the power and providence of the living God.

The symbols of the holiness of creation and the power and providence of God are still all around us. So let us be mindful of them, live care-fully and reverently on the earth, and give thanks.  
Amen.