Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, September 27, 2026
"In the Hands of God"

Young at Heart Message

Before I begin today's sermon, I want to note that I used much of the same sermon today as I used for the pet blessing service last year. I did not do this to be lazy though, I assure you.

Rather, I read through it to see what I said last year and determine what I wanted to say this year. But as I read, tears came to my eyes and I decided that actually, last year's sermon was pretty good and said all that I'd like to say again this year.

So, for those of you with memories like an elephant, I hope you get something new out of this year's sermon. And for the rest of you, there might be some things I say that remind of you last year and that's because they should.

Let us begin:

Every year, Moravian Clergy celebrate Cup of Covenant. It is an opportunity for us to recommit to ministry and remember our ordination vows to study, pray, care for souls, preach, teach, and administer the sacraments.

In the Canadian District, because our clergy are spread out between Edmonton and Calgary and aren't able to connect in person very often, we have an annual Cup of Covenant retreat at King's Fold Retreat Centre.

Each year, I have the opportunity to be with my colleagues, and, importantly, I have the opportunity to rest, read, and be present with myself and with God.

Last year, the retreat happened the week before we did this pet blessing service, and one of the things I intended to do while I was at the retreat was read a book called *Divinanimality* in preparation for this sermon. I hoped the book would give me some insights into the relationships we have with animals who walk the Earth and journey with us throughout our lives.

However, I began reading the book, and it was DENSE. It was deeply philosophical, it used big academic words that I found unnecessary for this topic, and it really didn't resonate with me for this purpose.

And then, as I was sitting on a bench overlooking the river, listening to it babble as a bird sung its song nearby, I realized I don't need a deep philosophical or

academic discussion to help tell you what I already know about the divinity of animals.

I began thinking about my own relationship to animals in my life, and a flood of memories came rushing back – so quickly, in fact, that I felt an immediate need to start writing this sermon so I didn't forget what I wanted to say about it, even though I was supposed to be on retreat! (And today, I'm very glad I listened to that instinct!)

My experience with animals began at a young age. In fact, I think it's likely that animals have been a part of my life since the day I was born. And actually, it's deeply, generationally ingrained in my family's history.

Both my Mom and my Dad's families were farmers in Wisconsin. By the time I was born, my Dad's family was no longer actively farming so I never experienced their farm.

But my Mom's family was still actively farming. As a matter of fact, my parents - and therefore my little helpless baby self – all lived together in the house my Mom grew up in on their family farm.

My Dad was an active partner in the farm for the first few years of my life, so being around animals – not just dogs and cats but livestock like cows and pigs – was natural for me and I felt at home in their presence.

I got to experience the disgusting joy of allowing a calf to suck on my fingers, creating a beautifully sticky, sloppy mess that you didn't want to wipe on your clothes because if you did, you'd just transfer the sticky mess to another spot on your body later.

I got to walk through the stanchions in the barn, and I was strangely mesmerized by the milking process, the smell of the cattle, and the way their tails would flick around. Touching a cow's nose is wet, but oddly satisfying.

I was also simultaneously fascinated by and fearful of the bull in the cage in the corner. I was told from a young age that bulls can be dangerous, and I shouldn't get too close. But the poor guy just seemed so lonely!

When I was around three years old, my parents had to move on from farming for a variety of reasons, so we moved into town. My grandparents continued farming until I was in my early teens, so I still have tons of memories and joys of farm life, but my daily routine no longer included livestock.

Instead, my family eventually got cats, and then a dog. My young life was formed by these relationships to some extent, but it wasn't until I was in my 20's

that I decided to get my very first dog who was completely mine and not a family dog.

And that dog – a beautiful Bernese Mountain Dog named Kodiak – was the dog that needled his way deep in my heart and really ignited my physical and spiritual journey with animals. Kodiak helped me see God in new ways through his joy and zest for life, his steady calm, his ability to love all people and all other animals he encountered, his stoic demeanor, and his adaptability to the chaos of my life at that time.

Kodiak moved with me every single year of his life to a new dwelling. He saw other dogs come and go from my life, he was integral in my learning process, and he lovingly supported me as I worked to become a professional dog trainer and, eventually, as I bought and ran a dog daycare.

Kodiak also helped me understand the beauty and the divinity of other animals.

I began to notice the squirrels, rabbits, birds, and other critters that somehow managed to survive city life.

I started to notice deer, opossum, raccoons, skunks, cows, and horses not as simply parts of the landscape, but as individual members of God's creation that had purpose, joy, and beauty that was all their own.

I also began to notice when animals would appear in my life, and I started to resonate with a deeper meaning behind their presence.

I am an avid road biker, and one time I decided to bike from my home out toward the area where my grandparent's farm was. As I biked past one farm, I saw out of the corner of my eye a large animal running alongside me.

I turned to look, and a cow was running the fence line, not unlike a dog that might joyfully bound alongside their human. This cow was just living its best life, happily galivanting along the fence in sync with my riding.

That cow brought me so much joy in that moment, and it was like a little "wink from God" – a reminder that God is not some far-off entity, but is in fact right there with us, bounding along playfully, joyfully, and with a presence that we too often forget to notice.

Similarly, I lived in the country shortly before I moved to Canada, and one of my dogs – Lyra, who is no longer with me and who was also Lacey's daughter – would ALWAYS have a line of cows following her when we walked past a nearby farm. The group of cows that lived in that pasture changed each season, but each new group of cows loved her just the same.

I had four dogs in my home at the time, and Lyra was the only one the cows would follow like this. There was just something about her that they seemed to connect to. And, if I'm being honest, I connected to that same part of her, and she connected in a similar way to me.

Lyra just had a way of reading my emotions and empathizing with me that no other dog I've ever lived with has been able to do. And I think those cows saw that in her, too.

I could go on and on about the animals that I have shared my life with, and the animals that I have encountered in the natural world, and I am sure you all have stories about them too.

We seem to know intuitively that animals were created by God for a purpose, and that purpose is not simply to serve humans.

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God loves animals as he loves humans, and animals are deeply grounded in God's love and care. There must be truth to this statement because we see it over and over again if we pay close enough attention.

In fact, Job 12 states, "if you want to learn, then go and ask the wild animals and the birds, the flowers and the fish." It goes on to say, "every living creature is in the hands of God."

This text is ancient, and yet there is incredible wisdom in these statements. If you want to learn what God has done, any of the animals can tell you, probably in a deeper and more complete way than any human can.

Why? Well, because every living creature is in the hands of God. It's not just humans, as we've spent the last six weeks discussing. God cares about all living creatures and holds each one – from the crawling ant or the pesky mosquito to the regal lion or the majestic elephant – in deep, abiding love.

So why wouldn't we trust the experience of animals with regard to God? I believe they actually know more about God than we can know.

Animals don't overthink God. In fact, they don't think about God like we do at all. They don't analyze what scholarly articles or theologians say about God. They don't listen to what pastors with degrees say about God. They don't philosophize so much about their own relationship to God that their words become incomprehensible, like the book I tried to read last year.

Animals *experience* God. Animals *know* God in a deep, profound, rich way that we often struggle with. But there are some people who have been able to tap into this energy.

Jane Goodall is a common example. She knows what most of us could hardly imagine about the relationship of animals to God and our own spirituality. In 2021, she received the Templeton Prize, and in her speech, she said, "In the rainforest I learned about the interconnection of all species, each with a role to play. I felt a strong spiritual connection with the natural world."

Those of us who share our lives with pets often know about a deeper connection to the divine that occurs when we are present with our pets.

One of my favorite books is part of the *Wrinkle in Time* series by Madeleine L'Engle called *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*. In the book, there is a threat of nuclear war, and the family is essentially fighting the powers of evil to prevent the nuclear war from happening.

The family had recently lost their dog from the two prior books, Fortinbras, and one of the main characters, Meg, explains in the book that the dogs in their family just seem to show up on their doorstep. In that fashion, a dog shows up on their doorstep in the midst of the nuclear war chaos.

The dog's name, they decide, is Ananda, which another main character, Charles Wallace, explains is Sanskit and means "That joy in existence without which the universe will fall apart and collapse."

This family knows the importance of animals to life, to spirituality, to joy, and to our continued existence as a species on this Earth.

Ananda becomes an important conduit for Meg as Meg and Charles Wallace stay connected across space and time via a form of telepathy. Ananda strengthens their connection through touch and through her warmth, her breath, her beauty, and her Spirit.

L'Engle, the book's author, was deeply Spiritual and also a devoted Christian. The beauty with which she is able to relay the significance of animals to human spirituality is profound.

Those of us who have experienced this type of relationship with our pets or with other animals know the truth of her writing. Scripture knows the truth of these relationships, too.

Animals are mentioned throughout the Bible so many times that I own a book which documents every instance of a mention of animals in Scripture. And, it is a thick book.

Jesus himself is referred to as the "Lion" and the "Lamb," which symbolizes His dual nature. The Lion of the Tribe of Judah represents Jesus' power, sovereignty, and victory over evil. The Lamb of God signifies Jesus' humility, gentleness, and sacrificial atonement for humanity's sins.

Even in the time of Jesus, there was an awareness of the significance of animals to our lives and to the existence of the world.

Humans throughout history have recognized the importance of animals in service to humans, but there is also often a deeper connection that goes beyond service to humans.

We can see and understand that animals have feelings and emotions, though they are often expressed differently than ours.

For example, Lacey and I had to spend a lot of time when I first brought her into my life working to understand each other. We have spent our life together doing this work and building a relationship that is unique from the other relationships I have had with my dogs.

Because Lacey is a Great Pyrenees, she was bred to be incredibly independent. She was also bred for a specific job: to guard livestock.

As you can see, however, there are no livestock in her life and there never has been. Without access to the one thing she was bred to do, she started using her natural skills to protect our home… from everything. Every little flap of a butterfly's wings a kilometre away would cause Lacey to bark when I first got her.

I have had to do a lot of work to manage her environment so that she does not bark all day long and anger the neighbours. But I also had to learn to express my gratitude to her for the work she has done over the years to protect myself and my home.

Once I began to thank her for her work and for her care, our relationship changed dramatically. She settled into a life with me that allowed her to be more at ease.

Many of you who share your lives with animals likely have come to know a similar relationship with your pets. There is a richness that comes from learning to speak a language that is foreign to us.

For verbal humans, we can struggle to speak in ways that do not use words, and yet animals require exactly this from us. We must learn to observe and communicate differently than what we are naturally inclined to do.

And in that learning there comes deeper understanding. And there is also a spiritual richness of experience that comes from this understanding.

We are raised in a culture that insists that we learn *about* God. We are more unfamiliar with the concept of *experiencing* God. Animals, on the other hand, are completely experiential.

We can learn from them as much as they can learn from us. Tapping into the nature of animals and learning to experience God and spirituality instead of trying to wrap our heads around it can be freeing and fruitful.

So, as we move into our time of blessing the animals who are present here today, may we seek to experience our faith, our spirituality, and our relationship with God differently.

May we come to know God through experiencing God, through the experience of Jesus Christ on Earth, and through the animals that God created to share the beauty of the Earth with us.

As we go from here, may we open our eyes to God's beauty in all its forms and rest in God's Love and Joy. Amen.

Let us pray:

Faithful God, help us to experience Your love, Your grace, and Your joy through new and different ways of being in the world. Thank you for the gift of each and every creature on this earth, from ants to zebras and everything in between. Thank you for gifting us with the responsibility to care for, protect, and learn from the creatures that inhabit our world. In humility and love, we pray. Amen.