

Blessing of the Animals
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Homily

From Dominion to Delight

Amy Morgenstern

In the first of the Bible's two versions of the creation of the world, in the book of Genesis, we read this about God's creation of human beings.

God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'

In both accounts of the creation, all the other creatures are just a category: "plants" or "the fish of the sea" or "everything that moves upon the earth." The part about how humanity was created, this single species, gets a special mention and a lot more detail. It's not surprising, since we're the ones telling the story. Probably if starfish have a creation story, it gives starfish a starring role. (No pun intended.) But when we of the West, and of the people shaped by the Bible, told this story, we did more than pay special attention to our part of the story. We also decided that we were commanded by the creator to dominate everything else, and that caused a lot of sorrow and trouble.

We have other creation stories now. In one we all know, life on earth began about four billion years ago with single cells, each cell without a nucleus. From those first living things, everything else evolved, over millions of generations, plants and fungi, bacteria and protozoans, and animals of all kinds, including us homo sapiens, human beings. We are one of the most

recent animals to develop, but we are not the last, and we are not the best. We're just one member of the family.

As primates, we are family with the other several hundred species of primates, from lemurs to gorillas. We are family with beetles, which make up one-quarter of all animals, a million and a half species. We are family with tardigrades, which can live on the freezing-cold tops of mountains and in the heat vents of underwater volcanoes. All of us descend from those first parents in the seas of the Earth of four billion years ago. We are all part of one interdependent web.

And all of us share this small home, this beautiful blue boat. We know now that we cannot subdue the earth and its creatures without destroying ourselves. We are too closely intertwined. As the environmental activist Wangari Maathai says, "Today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking, so that humanity stops threatening its life-support system. We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own - indeed to embrace the whole of creation in all its diversity, beauty and wonder."

The people who told the old story, the story in the Bible, understood that nature was beautiful and full of wonders. But when they said that God told us to have dominion over the rest of nature, they could not have understood what that meant. In their time, the idea that one species, our species, could actually wipe out other species, was probably unthinkable. They weren't suggesting that we destroy entire habitats to plow our fields and build our cities. They thought of a big city as one of ten thousand people, and their whole world had a smaller

population than many of our cities. They could not have dreamed that there could one day be over seven billion humans and that we would be capable of remaking so many habitats that we would create a great extinction of other species. They could not have imagined that we would change the climate of the entire planet. They didn't even know what the whole planet WAS; they probably didn't imagine that the world included much more than the lands around the Mediterranean Sea: a few hundred miles north and east of it, a ways south, nothing at all to its west.

So when they imagined God telling us to “subdue” the earth, they probably meant, clear away rocks and plants to plant fields of barley and orchards of olives. When they thought they were supposed to have “dominion” over other living things, they probably meant, we could hunt them and eat them, tame some of them and make some of them work for us.

Now, our power has grown and we can no longer afford to have dominion. If we try, we destroy the interdependent web of which we are a part.

Our knowledge has also grown, and with it, our capacity for delight. We know of more species—hundreds of thousands more than we knew about when we wrote down the words of Genesis, three thousand years ago. We can observe the wonders of animals that live far away on other continents, and deep in the oceans. We have microscopes, and from using them, know that there are countless tiny animals all around us, even inside us, but too small to see without them. (Though Mahavira Swami, a saint in the Jain tradition who lived about 2,700 years ago, thought this was probably true—and he didn't have a microscope.)

I think that's why God needed a dog [in our reading: "God Got a Dog," from *God Got a Dog*, Cynthia Rylant, Beach Lane Books, 2013]. Because She recognized that She was connected to everything She created. And we're connected to everything too, not because we are gods but because we are all sibling creatures on this small planet, all members of one family. And because, as busy as She was, She craved delight. She didn't want to just be in charge of everything. She wanted to be connected.

For a lot of us, pets and the other animals we live with are our peek into the much wider world of the approximately seven million, seven-hundred-and-seventy thousand animal species that aren't homo sapiens. They're like ambassadors from the rest of the animal world. They are messengers bringing us the reminder that humans are not the be-all and the end-all and that the world is full of creatures who live very differently than we do. They help us to delight in difference. And they bring us other kinds of delight: fun and affection, love and mystery. Like all animals, they bless us with their presence and participation in the interdependent web of all existence, and today, we bless them.