

“The Friendly Beasts”

Isaiah 11: 1-9; Luke 2: 1-20

Have you ever noticed how many of our Christmas and Advent hymns either feature or include Creation in their verses? Think about that for a minute. How about “Do you Hear What I Hear?”...The night wind talks to the little lamb. Creation sees the sign of the newborn Savior first. Creation recognizes the miracle of new life which came into our world before humans. Creation shared the good news of Jesus’ birth first.

Or how about “Away in a Manger”...the stars look down where he lay or the cattle are lowing but no crying he makes. Or what about “Joy to the World”...I know, I know, I won’t let us sing that song until Christmas Eve but just play along with me. “While field and flood, rock, hill and plains, repeat the sounding joy”

In some of our favorite Christmas and Advent hymns, Creation recognizes the miracle of new life in its midst long before humans do. Creation recognizes and celebrates the gift of the new born Savior long before the angels ever announce it to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay; in fields where they lay keeping their sheep, on a cold winter's night that was so deep. Did you see what I did there?

Or how about the old English Christmas carol, The Friendly Beasts? Not as well-known as some of the others but it features the animals in the stable that night

with Mary, Joseph and the new born baby. This old English carol tells of the gifts the animals shared with Jesus. We hear of a donkey, a cow, a dove, a sheep but there are more verses to this song than just what are listed in our hymnals. There's a cat, a dog, some mice, and a spider, yes a spider. This absolutely fascinates me, that the hymn writer would imagine a spider in the stable that night, a spider who weaves a halo for Jesus as a sign that Jesus would be a Savior to thee and thine.

These are ordinary animals, a donkey which carried Mary, a sheep which gave its wool for a blanket, a cow which gave its manger for Jesus' bed, a dove to sing lullabies for Jesus, a cat to purr and warm Jesus' toes, a dog to bark at every strange noise so that Jesus would be safe from harm, a spider to weave a halo, and mice, the poorest of all, to offer love, the greatest gift they knew.

This very image of the friendly beasts, animals just doing what they do, is so very ordinary yet when we step back and see them all together, we realize that it is the Peaceable Kingdom come to life. This image of the friendly beasts changes everything for us because we don't often think about creation as being front and center, as Creation as being central to the Christmas story. Nor do we every really think of the beasts as being friendly, yet there they are, all together in the stable, offering us an alternative picture, offering us "a biblical picture of God's Kingdom of Peace and Love, a picture where the animals will indeed be friendly with one

other, a picture [Where The wolf will live with the lamb. The leopard and the kid will lie together. The lion will eat straw with the ox.

What the friendly beasts teach us is] that God's peace, that God's love is for all Creation, that the peaceable Kingdom is more than the absence of conflict. It is God's Shalom in reality. It is the gift of setting things right and healing the brokenness in our lives, healing the brokenness of creation. In the Peaceable Kingdom, people will love one another as beloved children of God and shalom will flow deep and wide, embracing and fulfilling all creation."

Or as one author put it..."In the fullness of time, the Christmas story says a girl gave birth ringed by animals. She lay the baby in one of their feeding troughs, where animal bodies would warm the air around his fresh born human body. Mother and child fell asleep and woke to their chuffs and shuffling hooves, their calls, and the shuddering of their hides. Later, sheep herders smelling of dirt, damp wool, and milk crowded into the stable. Out in the wild night fields, these animal men sitting in the dark were the first to get the word. A baby had been born, they were told, a baby who would show people a way out of their small pinched lives, a baby who would show people a way to abandon themselves to the ever present, unstoppable current of Love, God's Love, a love which carries all things to radiant wholeness.

The angels told the shepherds to go and find this new born child. To recognize him, they should look for a child at home among the animals. This new born baby would bridge the gap between creation and humankind once more. The angels knew that this connection to creation, this connection to the animals, this connection to the friendly beasts would make all the difference. [Because this connection would echo a return to the Garden, a return to a world, now healed and made whole.

This is the promise given to all Creation, both animal and human alike. It is a promise of a transformation. No longer would creation or human need to live in fear. Through this child at home among the animals, power and might are no more, peace will reign, and love will always overcome.]

This is the friendly beasts' hope. This is all Creation's hope, that one day soon, all, especially the human ones, that all will completely abandon themselves to and in God's Great Love so that the Peaceable will come to be here on Earth as it is in Heaven. For this, for this hope, for this vision, for this reality, all creation waits." Amen.