

17 Pentecost 2003  
"What is Man in Nature?"  
The Rev. Thomas W Simmons IV

So here we are at church. We're doing it a little differently today, aren't we? We're outside and we've brought all of our animals with us. Does this strike you as a bit odd? **Why are we doing this?**

Well, the short answer is it's St. Francis day. He's the saint many of you have as a statue in your garden. He's the nature saint, known for his close relationship with animals and nature. You see pictures of him with songbirds resting on his shoulders and deer eating from his hand. He blessed the animals. So on St. Francis day we do the same.

Why did Francis do this? Was he a sort of granola-crunching, hippie, nature-lover like you see around today? Probably not. Francis' deep relationship with nature flowed from **a deep theological vision of man and nature** presented in our Scripture lessons this morning.

Our lessons show human beings as God intended us to be. They show us: 1) in relationship with animals in nature, and 2) in relationship with each other in marriage. That's two sermons really: animals and marriage. Since it's St Francis day I'm going with the animals.

But marriage is an extremely important and relevant topic, too. Marriage and sex and divorce are major issues in American culture and in the Episcopal Church, and many people struggle profoundly with these in their own lives. So I've written a little something on the subject on the back of your Psalm sheet. Take a look at it after the liturgy. **So let's look at the relationship of man and nature.**

Our Psalm this morning asks the question, "What is man...?" That's one of the deep questions - and one of the most hotly contested questions in life. How you view the human being shapes your entire worldview, your theology and politics and the course of your own life and potential.

**So what is man?** The Psalmist asked this question as he gazed at the night sky. "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have set in their courses, What is man that you should be mindful of him, the son of man that you should seek him out?"

"You have made him but little lower than the angels; you adorn him with glory and honor; You give him mastery over the works of your hands; you put all things under his feet: All sheep and oxen, even the wild beasts of the field, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, and whatsoever walks in the paths of the sea."

Do you ever gaze up at the glittering night sky? I love the sense of wonder and awe. But wow! It makes you feel small, doesn't it? What are we compared to all that? Many people, both ancient and modern, say we are really nothing much, just the product of random chance in a vast, chaotic universe.

Our Psalm sees it differently. In the midst of the universe, God has created human beings with a special dignity and purpose. We are "crowned with glory and honor" and we have been given benevolent mastery over God's creation.

The Psalmist gets this from our Old Testament lesson this morning. In Genesis 2 **God makes the world with man at the center of it.** God builds it all around the human being and tells him to name it all. So God designed us for this beautiful relationship with God, each other and every creature on earth.

But think about it. Do we experience this? Do we have that sense of glory, harmony, dignity and benign authority and mastery? No, I think our experience is quite different. We fall short of this vision, don't we?

That's what our Epistle lesson from the Book of Hebrews addresses this morning. It looks back to Psalm 8 and notes that, though God crowned us with glory and honor, "we do not yet see everything in subjection." He's noting the disparity between what God intended for us, and the actual reality of our lives.

**God's gifts have been forfeited, his generosity squandered, his gifts twisted.** Now people don't just name the animals; they're cruel to them. We don't just tend and cultivate the earth; we strip mine and pollute it. We victimize and are often victimized by the natural world. Most animals are afraid of us and we are afraid of many of them. The world is not as it should be.

"We do not now see everything in subjection..." As the story goes, Adam and Eve disobeyed God. They didn't trust and obey God. They didn't accept God's gifts on God's terms, but **sought to define reality on THEIR terms.** The result is alienation from God, from ourselves and from the world.

But thankfully God doesn't leave us on the ash heap. His goal is restoration. So he sent Jesus Christ to bring us back and to restore the world - and the Book of Hebrews tells us how. "We do not yet see all things in subjection to us, **BUT we do see Jesus**, who like us was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor... because he tasted death for everyone."

This is a profound and extremely concise statement of the Gospel. Jesus succeeded where Adam failed. Jesus trusted and obeyed God - even to the point of death - where Adam sought independence from God. Jesus died as atonement for our sins, to forgive the sin that alienates us from God and the world.

He forgives us by his death and frees us from death by his resurrection. He draws us to himself in Christian community and restores us to our true dignity and glory. He shares his new humanity with us and puts us back to the work he has given us to do. All things are subject under his feet and will be under our feet as well. **This is the really big picture of Building Christians for Service.**

Now St. Francis grasped this reality and managed to live it in a unique and powerful way. He shows us that the deeper your relationship is with God, the deeper your relationship will be with nature. **The more you experience God's grace, the more you'll experience nature's beauty.** That's neat, isn't it?

That's expressed in our liturgy this morning. We are using Eucharistic Prayer D, which is thick with these themes. We pray, "You formed us in your image, giving the whole world into our care, so that, in obedience to you our Creator we might rule and serve all your creatures."

"But when our disobedience took us far from you, you did not abandon us to the power of death...you sent your only Son to be our Savior...To fulfill your purpose he gave himself up to death; and rising from the grave destroyed death and made the whole creation new."

This new reality makes it possible for us to do what we are doing here. We are able to go to God in worship as he originally intended. And we don't go alone. **We bring all of creation with us.** We are "giving voice to every creature under heaven." That's what Adam was supposed to do, representing all God's creatures, great and small before the throne of God. Now in Christ that's what we do.

So here we are, with God's world around us and his creatures with us. We come to praise God, to give thanks for all that he has given us. In this month of October, in which we focus on stewardship, we see the big picture. Through Jesus Christ, **our stewardship is the stewardship of all creation.** AMEN