Grace and peace to you from God our Creator, and from our Lord Jesus Christ, who has redeemed all of creation. AMEN

I know that seeing animals in church is a surprise to many, and unsettling to others. A friend once told me disapprovingly that having an animal blessing in church was “nothing more than yielding to a Victorian sentimentality about pets.” And there are churches that have used pet blessings more as a marketing gimmick, and less as an act of worship. And yes, I agree that sometimes in our culture pets can sometimes become idols. All too often, people care more about an abused puppy that makes the news than they do about an abused child.

But animals have been part of the human story, and part of God’s story, from the very beginning. In the most ancient of the creation stories in Genesis, God looks at the man he has created and says, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” And the story says that God “formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.” Yes, the animals were offered to the man as companions and helpers before God even created the woman. And the humans and the animals exist peaceably in Eden, the garden of Paradise, with the humans given the task of tending the plantings that the LORD God had planted so that all could eat their fill. But as we know, that relationship between humans and animals in Eden, the garden of Paradise, was soon shattered. God had given humans stewardship and authority over Creation, but humans soon turned that stewardship into domination and exploitation. And so, the story goes, people became so wicked and evil in their intentions that God was “grieved to his heart,” and says, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.” But in that ancient story, God still sees something good in his creation, and provides a means of rescuing and renewing Creation through Noah and the Ark. And as the story goes, at the end of the destruction, the LORD God remembers Noah, and opens the door of the Ark, and Noah and his family and the animals come out. But sadly, the relationship between them has changed, and God says that from then on, “the fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered.” Because of the sinfulness of people, the animals must now live in fear.

But still, God makes a new covenant, a new promise. And it’s interesting, he doesn’t just make the promise to the humans—he makes it to the animals, as well. It’s an everlasting covenant not only with Noah and his descendants, but also with “every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.” And God sets the rainbow in the clouds as a promise of redemption, as a sign of the covenant “between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”

And then throughout scripture, the relationship between humans and animals is intertwined. And from then on, the story of the relationship between humans and the rest of Creation becomes ever more complicated, ever more violent, ever more broken. God’s law given to the Israelites is filled with injunctions to prevent God’s people from abusing animals, requiring specific standards of care for them. And then the law goes on to establish rules for how people are to treat the land that they farm, requiring that the land be given a rest from planting, for example. But still, Creation groans under the dominion of humans. The Apostle Paul, in the passage we heard from his letter to the Romans, describes the situation as Creation groaning in labor pains, waiting for redemption, waiting for the revealing of God’s redemption.

Many times, we hear this passage from Romans and we hear it only as talking about salvation of our souls, as describing the pain we experience while waiting for heaven so that we can be freed from the material world and from these bodies that are subject to decay, and we picture some disembodied existence where we’re not troubled by bodies anymore. But you know, that’s not the picture that Paul is painting, and it’s not the hope that he talks about.
For the early Church, heaven was not understood as “somewhere out there,” some other invisible plane that we migrate to once we are freed from our corrupted bodies. Rather, it was understood as the garden of Paradise reestablished here on earth. The churches were filled with art and mosaics that showed a glimpse of this earthly paradise, with green, lush fields, with exotic animals and birds, peacocks, zebras, ostriches, and crystal clear rivers and pools of still water flowing from the throne on which sits Christ, the ruler of all. It’s a vision that is not about being removed from earth, but rather of earth being restored to what God had intended, making it a place of wholeness and delight once more.

But the sad thing is, all too many Christians have bought into an understanding of salvation that despises the world God has made, seeing it as a hindrance. And all too many Christians have bought into an understanding of God’s gift of dominion over Creation as being instead a carte-blanche, blank-check, anything-goes license to exploit and use up and destroy anything that we want to, with no regard for those who come after us, as though it belongs to us, and as though it’s not a gift that we’ve been given to steward. And it’s linked directly to that notion that ultimately, the physical Creation doesn’t matter, because it’s all going to go away, and we’re going to float off into the stratosphere, so we might as well use it up now. That’s not Christian thinking, that’s Gnosticism.

When Paul talks about Creation groaning in labor pains, he’s saying not that Creation is groaning waiting for people to be spirited off somewhere else, but instead is groaning in hopeful, painful longing for God to give birth, through Christ Jesus, to a world in which there will no longer be exploitation and killing and destruction, a world in which the vision for Creation given to the Prophet Isaiah will finally be realized:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together;
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra,
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den.
They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

That’s the kind of hope that Paul is talking about: not just a spiritual salvation, but a very physical, material, earthly one, as well, a salvation that will include even those animals that God established covenant with right along with us back at the dawn of Creation. The early Church grasped this, and so they decorated the surfaces of their worship spaces with reminders of what was to come, a day when the relationship with animals and plants and rivers and streams would be made new.

And Paul tells us that this new Creation is being birthed in us, as well. The new Creation is all about us being transformed by God’s Spirit, who groans right along with us, longing for what has been promised. And so, as we groan here, looking around us and seeing the brokenness of Creation, we are called to transformation, we are called to mindfulness of the ways in which we participate in and cause that brokenness. And as we come today and give thanks for the world God has made for us, we bring into our worship the companions that God has given us to gladden our hearts, and we pray for the day that Creation will be restored, and Paradise will come anew. And we pray that God’s good kingdom will begin to come now, and that with transformed hearts and relationships that we will be co-creators with God of that earth made whole. AMEN