

# God's Secret Employees

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What does God think of animals? Genesis specifies that people are to “have dominion” over other creatures. It’s easy to overlook the fact that God pronounced all the sea monsters, bug swarms, birds, and wild things “good” (Gen. 1:21-25). Donkeys have bit parts in Scripture at Christmastime and on Palm Sunday. Jesus talks about sheep, of course, but since they can’t be trusted to stay put, it’s easy to wonder about Jesus’ motives for mentioning them. And Jesus notices birds. But they’re just birds, right? Do I have to mention the pigs? It seems like God favors people.

When I moved to an Illinois town as a new pastor, I found a veterinarian for my cat, Satori. One day, Dr. Wallfield ambushed me: “I think that the United Methodist Church should take over the Presbyterian Church. We’re three times bigger!” Hmm. Several minutes later this Bible-reading Methodist church teacher-vet pointed out something that delighted me. Having “remembered” (Gen. 8:1) all the animals in the ark, God’s covenant includes not only Noah, his family, and his descendants, but all the animals of the earth (9:10).

I returned to the manse. Satori had the run of the church some mornings. John the farmer threatened to make my darling the work end of a mop. Satori struck back one spring evening by sneaking in the door to attend the Maundy Thursday service. He strolled between parishioners’ legs from the back pew to the front, making sure to brush farmer John’s. I saw a wave of smiles mysteriously wash across the sanctuary. I looked at their faces and wondered, bemused. Satori emerged near Marilyn’s shoes and joined me at the pulpit. That cat must have read Genesis. “God remembers me!” “I belong!”

Some years later I was resting and Satori was nearby. I sat up and petted him. Something extraordinary happened: I felt the cat’s sweetness flood into my hands. I kept them in place for a long while, rapt in the divine sensation.

Maybe Calvin had a similar experience. “All creatures are in God’s hand,” he preached one spring day. “God employs them for what he likes best. For example, if

God enlists wild beasts to serve for our benefit, they must do it. For God leads them by his secret moving. . . .” [ed. from: *The Sermons of M. John Calvin Upon the Fifth Book of Moses called Deuteronomie . . .* tr. A. Golding [1583], 16th–17th century facsimile eds. (Oxford and Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 1141].

In 1995 Satori ministered to my late husband, David, the victim of a drunk driver’s flip-out in a highway construction zone. After returning from the hospital he nursed his broken ribs in a recliner 24/7 and rested his legs in a second chair. Satori leapt on the chair on day one and encircled his feet, keeping vigil for two months. The day David returned to work, he vacated the chair, even though my husband continued to sleep downstairs for several more weeks. Calvin might have commented, “If you had heard me preach on June 5, 1556, you might not be so surprised. It was not the cat’s idea; it was God’s.”

I am old enough to remember John Glenn in orbit and fishnet stockings. So imagine my surprise at finally seeing the last verse of Jonah a few days ago: God thunders, “Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons . . . *and also many animals?* (4:11, italics added).

What does God think of animals? God remembers them, covenants with them, regards them as ministers, and is concerned for them. They, too, are God’s beloved. That includes birds, sheep, and pigs.