

**Messengers of Joy**  
**Westminster Presbyterian Church**  
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When I was a kid, I had a cat for about a week. A secret cat. A cat that only my sister and I knew about.

As a child, I loved animals. Planted in tall clumps of grass, with weathered copies of *Zoobooks* strewn across my lap, I watched birds and squirrels through red binoculars. In the evening, I came home, at one time or another, to crickets, fish, a box turtle, hamsters, and a whole generational saga of guinea pigs. And when a neighbor's cat gave birth to kittens, I just couldn't pass up the chance to take one home with me.

There was a reason why my family didn't have a cat. My dad is allergic. But that didn't stop my younger sister and me from sneaking a kitten into my bedroom. There she stayed for about a week until she—perhaps divining that her new owners had no plans for how to buy more food—got out of my room. Imagine my dad's surprise when he saw a cat roaming the upstairs hallway and suddenly understood why he had been sneezing and coughing all week.

The next day, with our heads bowed low, my sister and I returned the kitten. And thus ended the week of the secret cat.

Well, it looks like I've finally managed to sneak some more animals into my Father's house.

Of course, the truth is that God might be the only one here who's unsurprised to see so many animals worshipping alongside God's children.

At some point, in our church's history, we decided that worship is only for rational creatures like ourselves. We shoved nature out of our churches and, in many ways, out of our lives. Nature can be dangerous, so I understand why we've done this. I personally enjoy not being hunted by lions, and you know, having things like a roof. But I wonder if we went too far.

It's like when you only surround yourself with people who think and look and act like you do. Your understanding and experience of the world suddenly become very narrow.

Hamlet once quipped to Horatio, "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Indeed, dogs hear sounds we do not. Alligators feel minute vibrations to which we are oblivious. Red wood ants sense, through electromagnetism, imminent earthquakes. Bees and butterflies perceive ultraviolet radiation unbeknownst to us. And here our psalmist says that the rest of creation may too know something about God, may in fact be capable of praising God—a kind of praise that perhaps we've forgotten about.

The biblical story tells us that God never designed humans to be separate. We were created as *part* of the garden. The illusion of separateness is what, in the biblical imagination, leads

humanity out of the garden and then to the ultimate act of separation, Cain's murder of his brother Abel, which leads to the creation of the first separate human city.

And yet God still dreams of reunification. In the Book of Revelation, the prophet envisions the garden reunited with the city. In the Ten Commandments, God says that the Sabbath day is also for animals, not just people. And in the Scripture passage we just read, we hear a theme repeated throughout the Bible: the idea that all of creation is engaged in the worship of God.

The litany of praise in this psalmist's hymn is sweeping... Mountains praise God. Angels praise God. The sun and moon and stars praise God. The earth and sea praise God. Trees praise God. Animals praise God. People, young and old, powerful and weak alike, praise God.

All these things that we regard as separate from us, all things that the ancients would have regarded as separate gods—the sun and the moon and the sea—are united in one chorus of praise for the one and only God.

But note that in our psalm, we don't hear praise from humanity until after the rest of creation has already begun to praise God. And that got me wondering: Do we need our animal companions here, and in fact all of nature, to remember how to praise God?

Now, when we use the word *praise* in everyday conversation, it's very individualistic: we're flattering or affirming another individual. But the biblical concept of praise is so much richer.

The Hebrew word for praise used by the psalmist is *Hallelu*, which we know from the word *Hallelujah*, which means literally "Praise the Lord." It means to be grateful, to revere, to stand in awe, to enjoy the gift of this moment, and to know that you are not separate.

The great Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann defines it as "the exuberant rhetorical act of gladly ceding one's life and the life of the world over to YHWH in joyous self-abandonment."

Praise is delighting in life, not because of who we are separately, but because of who we are together, in God.

It's standing in the Adirondacks and losing yourself in its beauty. It's forgetting your cares with a friend and laughing so hard that your sides hurt. It's dance and a choir singing and children swirling like dervishes and the unrestrained happiness of a dog when you come home.

These animals are, in the spirit of the psalmist, here to remind us of the power of praise. They are messengers of God's joy. "God sometimes uses animals to deliver messages to people," writes Myrlene Hess, a pastor in New Jersey. "A dove told Noah that there was dry land ahead. A donkey told Balaam to pay attention to God. A big fish gave Jonah time to consider God's call. A rooster told Simon Peter to wake up to a tough reality."

We need these animals. The forest, these animals, the sky, they are alive with song—inviting us even now to join it. Praise be to God. **Amen.**