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WILL SNOOPER BE IN HEAVEN?

*St. Francis, Eschatology,
and a Theology of Creation*

*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.
—Isaiah 11:6*

As you read through the newspaper in the spring or the fall, you might come upon photographs of the blessing of pets. If you are not familiar with it, this is a service usually performed in Anglican and Roman Catholic parishes. The service comes either

in the spring during Rogation days (the days following Easter and before Ascension Thursday) or in the fall (the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi). The members are encouraged to bring their kitties and puppies (in places like rural Wales they even bring their lambs) for a blessing by the priest or vicar. Some of us shun this for several reasons. One, is there really spiritual blessing or benefit conveyed by any act outside of faith? Two, do dogs and cats (and sheep and canaries) really need it?

The practice came about due to certain emphases in the church calendar and has developed over many years. It has roots in rural Britain where vicars made their way through lambing season or harvest time to ask God's blessing on animals and crops. In the Roman tradition, it is associated more with St. Francis, who is said to have spent much time in the woods "preaching" to the birds and, in general, giving thanks for creation.

The rite of the blessing of pets is growing in American Episcopal and Roman Catholic circles. However, most won't tell you, "I am bringing Rover to church because of Rogation Day" or "Because I, too, want to be associated with St. Francis's emphasis on thanking God for all of his creation, I bring my Tweety Bird." I suspect that most bring their pets to be blessed for other more sentimental reasons. I not only understand those reasons, I admit to the same sentiment.

Where am I going with this? The photos in the paper of the blessing of the pets coincided with a lengthy conversation I had in the car with my son while my wife was shopping (great theological discussions often happen while my wife is shopping). This conversation

had to do with Snooper, and with Shadow, and with Tabby, and with eschatology, and with the hope in the heart of a little boy.

My son asked me a question that I bet most of you either asked as a child or have been asked by a child: will there be animals in heaven? My son wanted to know whether Shadow and Tabby would be in heaven. I think the conversation started because we talked about how our Welsh Corgi was getting older. This triggered not only a sadness in our midst at the thought of losing the little creature that had brought so much joy, but an opportunity to teach the Bible to my son.

“Well,” I replied, looking for the words that would blend the truth of Scripture with the pastoral need in my son’s life, “let me tell you about Snooper.” Then I told the following story.

“Snooper was my childhood dog. A mongrel that looked like his ancestry could have included Welsh Corgis, Border Collies, German Shepherds, and Blue Tick hounds, Snooper was given to me on a cold winter morning when I was five years old. He came in a little cardboard box. Aunt Eva had told Osborn Turner, the famed school bus driver and hog farmer of Watson, Louisiana, that I sure could use a dog. I was an only child and coming out of some tough times as a little fellow, so Aunt Eva figured a puppy would help. This was long before psychology studies showed that pets help hurting kids and old folks. And Osborn found this pup.

“Aunt Eva would never allow a dog or cat or any other animal in the house, but she relented on this occasion because of the severe winter that year and the helplessness of that pup—or maybe because he was

just downright cute! That little black and white pup began to grow, and he got into everything in sight. He spent most of his time snooping in the lower kitchen cabinets, and that was the reason Aunt Eva named him Snooper.

“Snooper and I grew up together. We ran through fields, chased lambs, got chased by bulls, got lost in cypress swamps, and he even went to school with me a few times. But eventually that little pup, who came to be my best friend, became very, very sick. I will never forget Dr. Smith, our veterinarian, coming out and pronouncing words that shook my world: “Son, Snooper is about to go to dog heaven.” That last night of Snooper’s life I slept with the old dog out in a shed in the back of the yard. I was about fifteen. When it was all over, I cried like anyone would. Like you probably will, son, when old Shadow finally goes. But I have a hope.”

“You will see Snooper again?” my son asked.

“Well, I don’t know how it all works, son, but God’s Word says that creation—and that includes Snooper and Shadow and Tabby and all of the animals everywhere—is waiting for Jesus to come again. All of creation is waiting for a new heaven and a new earth.”

I began to quote from Romans.

The created world itself can hardly wait for what’s coming next. Everything in creation is being more or less held back. God reins it in until both creation and all the creatures are ready and can be released at the same moment into the glorious times ahead. Meanwhile, the joyful anticipation deepens. (Romans 8:19–21, MSG)

“So this is not all there is, for us or for creation,” I told him. “And I know that the Bible tells us what that new day will be like for the world of animals.

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“God is on the move. Eden was lost through sin. But Jesus has redeemed us, and what he has done in our lives is now spreading through all the universe. One day everything will be brought fully under the lordship of Jesus, including creation. There is going to be a new heaven and a new earth, and it seems quite clear that since God originally made animals to provide companionship, even amusement, then they too will be redeemed.”

“So I will see Shadow again?” he asked, wanting my Bible lesson to answer his deepest longing.

“Son, I know how you feel. I want to see Snooper again. All I know is that God made the animals, our pets, and God is going to renew all things. This is not the end. There is mystery, but there is great hope in the mystery of God’s goodness.”

About that time my wife came back to the car, and we drove home and talked some more. As we walked through the door, grocery bags in arm, we were greeted by wagging tails and contented purrs.

We are not planning to have any blessing of the pets per se, but we will stand with St. Francis of Assisi to

say, “Thank you, Lord, for your gift of creation. It is wonderful. It is so like you to create a Welsh Corgi.” We will, in a sense, go with the English vicars to the fields and say, “Lord, unless you bring the rain and the sun, there will be no crops. Unless you, O Lord, give protection to this ewe, there will be no lambs.” We will acknowledge God’s sovereign goodness in creation and our dependence upon him.

Little girls and boys and parents struggling for answers, come to the Lord and leave your hopes with him who made puppies and kittens and lambs and lions.

Yes, I sure would like to see old Snooper again.
Who knows?

You know who.