

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? Amen.

Today is St. Francis Day. We remember one of the great saints of the church who was famous for his love of animals, especially his affinity with birds. The birds used to follow him around, sit on his head, sit on his shoulders, and that's why often you'll see a bird bath in the form of St. Francis. I once heard of a man in England who thought he'd like to emulate St. Francis, and he too would like birds to come and flutter around him and rest on his head. So he built a special hat with a wide brim and a very tall seed container on top of the hat. And the idea would be that as he walked through the woods, the birds would flutter around and come and rest on his hat and eat the seeds in the bird feeder on his head. It didn't quite go as planned. He did go out for a walk in the woods. He hadn't got very far when a large squirrel jumped out of a tree, latched onto the bird feeder, he cricked his neck to one side with the force of the squirrel, and he had to wear a neck brace for a year. He didn't wear that hat again. St. Francis didn't need to wear hats like that to attract the birds and the animals to him. He had this natural affinity with the birds and the animals.

And then we've heard that story about how one day he preached to the birds. And our old friend, the prophet Job, also spoke about birds in the reading that we heard. And he says something very similar later on when he says, "who teaches us more than the animals of the Earth and makes us wiser than the birds of the air?" Job, like St. Francis, thought we can learn from the birds, that they have lessons to teach us. So let me offer a couple of examples of what those lessons might be.

The first lesson comes from Jesus. He says this, "look at the birds of the air. They do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not more valuable than they?"

Jesus's point is clear. The God who made the whole world loves all of his creation. He cares for the tiniest little bird. So how much more does he care for us, his children? Jesus is encouraging us to trust

in God's love for each one of us, to rely on him, his care and his provision. And part of learning to rely less on ourselves and our own strengths is learning to trust in other people. Other people around us are part of God's provision for us.

I love watching the pelicans fly on the beach. And you don't often see them on their own. They often, as you know, fly in that wonderful formation and they fly like that to support each other. Apparently, they save 18% of their energy if they fly in a formation like that. And if we imagine ourselves flying through life, are we flying solo or have we found a place in a formation to give us that strength and support?

Other kinds of birds are named in the Bible such as sparrows and swallows. Psalm 84 says, "the sparrows find a home and the swallows find a rest for themselves at your altar, oh Lord of hosts." That's an image of the birds finding refuge and peace in God's presence. God shelters us as he shelters the birds who find their rest in him. And Jesus uses an avian image to make the point. "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wing?" An amazing image of God seeking to care for his people by gathering them under his wing. And we hear that phrase throughout scripture. God's longing to gather his people under his wing, a picture of how we can find peace and rest under God's wing. Just as the birds gather their children close to him, so God longs to gather us close to him.

Sparrows, swallows, hens. Do you know there are 29 varieties of birds mentioned in the Bible? You'll be pleased to know I'm not going to work my way through all of them, but I am going to pick out one more. I'll give you a clue. It's a big bird with big claws or talons. Sometimes they are bald, but many good people are bald, so don't hold that against them. Eagles. The prophet Isaiah says, "they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint." And we're all familiar with that amazing image of an eagle who seems to soar in the sky without even

flapping their wings because they're relying on the thermal whatevers to give them what they need to rise and to soar, a reminder, a picture of how God can empower us to rise above the limitations and weaknesses of our world.

If we turn to God and place our hope in him, the promise is that he will replenish our spirits and enable us to rise and soar above the challenges that we face. We're called to be like eagles, to spread our wings, to ascend to new heights of faith as we follow God's leading and rely on his strength.

And I have a PS. We sang that Psalm earlier. The choir sang Psalm 148, which includes these words: "Praise the Lord from the earth, mountains and hills, wild animal and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds." And St. Francis is especially important these days because he grasped that vision that all of creation praises God, that all creation together joins in praise of its creator. And when we hear the dawn chorus, the birds singing outside our window, rather than thinking, oh, that's far too early and noisy, when we hear the dawn chorus, why don't we join in, begin our day with saying, just as the birds of the air are praising their creator, so let's begin our day by joining with the birds in praise of the God who created the world. That's St. Francis's vision, that all creation together praises the wonder and the glory of the creator.

Amen.