



March 15, 2020

With Us Abide

The Reverend Dr. John A. Dalles

Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11

In a perfect world, we would all be assembled here together this morning. But as one of our elders has said, it would be unreasonable and irresponsible for us to be doing that, having received word that there is now a confirmed coronavirus case here in Western Pennsylvania, and being mindful of the state of emergency which the mayor declared on Friday afternoon, and which goes into effect tomorrow morning. So we are together here in spirit as we worship today. My prayer for you is that you are well, and will remain well. My larger prayer for you is that you are calm and will remain calm. In these uneasy days, being calm is more than a virtue. It is a necessity.

We have for our Scripture today a passage from Paul's letter in which he makes it clear that we are going through something that he understands, and that God understands. Suffering that produces endurance, and endurance that produces character, and character that brings about hope, and hope that does not disappoint us.

Recently, I read that Pope Francis told a young boy whose dog had died that heaven is open to all of God's creatures. I am glad he said that. It was a compassionate response to that boy. It is also a word of assurance to anyone who has had a pet — who wonders what happens when that pet dies. You may wonder, too. If so, these thoughts are for you. Even if you have not had a pet, you have experienced loss. You do know sadness. You do cope with suffering.

My story is personal.

Our dog, Brantley, died this past Easter, at age 11 ½, and when he did, he left a big empty hole in our hearts. We found ourselves grieving for him the way we would grieve for a dear friend and family member. Anyone who has had a companionable dog who has died, knows exactly how that feels.

Brantley picked us out, not the other way around.

We had lost our beloved Yorkie, Tuppence, after 17 ½ years. As she grew into old age, we had agreed together that when the time came, and she died, we would not get another dog. The reasons were very practical:

- We both worked,
- She spent a fair amount of time at home alone.
- We liked to travel.
- She didn't travel with us, which meant kennels and boarding and the costs that went with it.
- Life would be simpler without another dog — when the time came.

And then, the time came. Sweet Tuppence died. We reminded ourselves of what we had so logically agreed. But the house seemed very empty indeed. We missed that smiling little presence.

I was the weak link. I lasted a week — and then insisted that we get another dog. We agreed that it would be either another Yorkie or a Miniature Schnauzer, since both do not shed. We looked at several pet stores and shelters. We ended up at one particular pet store, with lots of puppies, and at least six Yorkie puppies. They were in kennel cages along a long wall, with some at the right end, and some at the left end. Lots of other dogs in the cages in-between.

As I walked from one end of the pet shop to the other, a small face with bright eyes and a sweet smile watched me walk by and walk back. His gaze was locked on my face. I asked one of the attendants in the shop what kind of a

dog it was. "A Yoshon," was the reply. (Half Yorkshire Terrier and half Bichon Frise). "We need to see that dog." Indeed, we did. The attendant brought him to the get-to-know-you enclosure, he nuzzled his head under Judy's chin, and that was all it took. She looked at me and said, "Do they have two of them?"

Our dog Brantley received love and care, affection and attention, treats and trips, from us. And yet: If we were to try to balance that with what he gave, the scales would tip heavily in his direction. Because, in addition to the love and care and affection and attention he gave us, he served as an example of unconditional love and pure empathy. I often referred to him as "love bundled up in fur."

If you have had a pet, you understand what I am saying.

There is something amazing that happens between one of God's creatures and the people in their lives. I tend to think it is something that God intended from the beginning, so that, from our animals, we receive love and affection, and, as we give it in return, we are the better for it.

I wish I could tell you that the Bible speaks in this way about dogs. But I have to tell you...

The Bible is not encouraging when you look in a concordance and are asking what it says — specifically — about "dogs." It seems the Biblical writers did not have a fondness for them. And even Jesus speaks disparagingly of dogs. When dog lovers who are also faithful Christians read these passages, they tend to wince.

And wonder. Maybe there were more stray, rabid, and dangerous dogs in Bible times? Maybe people then were averse to dogs, in the same way that they were averse to recreational swimming? No matter.

So we have to broaden our net. And look at other passages in the Bible that speak of animals and God's provision for them. Certainly one of the places we look are those verses about the Peaceable Kingdom.

In Isaiah 65, we hear about the New Heaven and New Earth where, "the wolf and the lamb shall graze together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent's food" (v. 25) — all of which tells us that animals will be part of life with God and humanity.

We know it from the wonderful paintings that Edward Hicks did, of the lion and the lamb, and all of the other animals of creation, together, in a sylvan landscape, looking as contented and gentle as can be.

Edward Hicks's many paintings of the Peaceable Kingdom — an eschatological state inferred from texts such as the Book of Isaiah, the Book of Hosea, and the Sermon on the Mount — will one day become the everlasting reality. It warms my heart to trust it to be true.

It is a picture of all things being made right, for all time. If that is not a picture of heaven, I do not know what is.

God watches over all of God's creation. The animals are indicators of God's long-term plan for them and for us. We see animals who experience all that we do. We suffer at times, and so do they. They grieve and are sad. So are we. We express joy; as they do. They love. Even as we love.

I like the way the hymn says it:

*"All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful,
The Lord God made them all."*

All creatures great and small. God took such infinite pains to make them, and to give them a place in this wonderful world; one must feel certain, therefore, that they will somehow inhabit God's eternal kingdom. Even as the animals were drawn to St. Francis, so, too, we will be surrounded by these good and gentle creatures.

Will our pets go to heaven?

The good news is that God intends for animals to be together and at peace in His eternal realm, to share the same type of companionable love they have shared here on earth — and more so.

Animals are God's creation, they give God joy, and they are beloved by God.

Are you hoping to see your pet again, in that eternal realm? Hold that hope deep within you. Remember that the Apostle Paul says, *“Hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”* (Romans 5:5)

Heaven will be God’s perfect place, where all that is, is forever wise, ultimately good, and entirely free from error.

Throughout the Bible, we see that God loves animals, and has them help us to understand the story of salvation.

- We remember that God loves the animals so much, that, at the time of the Great Flood, He ensured their survival — that was the reason that He commanded Noah to build that gigantic ark, and called the animals to it, two by two.
- We recall that, when Elijah went into hiding, he was fed twice a day by faithful ravens, and he had that vision of heavenly chariots of fire with horses.
- We remember that Balaam’s donkey talked and showed God’s power, by speaking.
- We recall that David was a shepherd — and that same nurturing work also describes Jesus: the Good Shepherd, who cares for us, His sheep. As Psalm 95 says:

*For He is our God,
and we are the people of His pasture,
and the sheep of His hand.*

It is clear that God loves animals. God knows that we love animals, too. Animals are part of God’s story. And so, animals are part of our story. Animals help show us God at work, saving the world.

- God made the animals and pronounced them good.
- God finds joy in animals, and has shared that joy with us.
- God cares for the animals, and has made us their caretakers.
- If God has done all of that here, certainly, God will do more and the same, in the hereafter.

Are you sad today? Are you missing your pet? Is there an empty and silent place in your home that was filled — not long ago? Are you wondering where — and whether — you will see your pet again? God knows. God understands. God is good. God knows your love.

If all that the Bible says is true, then I can say that I trust that I will see my beloved pet again, in God’s good time. We have clues from Scripture. We have hope based on who we know God to be. And we know that God’s intention for me and for you is the very best.

We have been made to live for Christ, in Christ, and representing Christ to others. There is a plan for our lives, into which we are living. It is as if the blueprint exists, but now we are building according to that design. In this Lenten season, we are thinking of it as our “Design for Christian living.”

You have questions about this plan, wondering what God has in mind. It is a plan that God is unrolling day by day. Sometimes we see one aspect of it. At other times, a different detail comes into focus. If we think and pray about it, we are shown what part of the plan God is helping us to fulfill, at present.

There are parts of this design that are accomplished already. We might say that your commitment to a living faith in our Lord Jesus Christ is part of that — it is like the foundation of a building. Now you are building on that foundation.

You may find that some of that work is hard and unexciting, or that it is easy and a joy. It truly depends upon where you are in the building up of the design. Trust that the Holy Spirit, as your Advocate and as your Comforter, is at work within you — assisting you in becoming what God intends you to be.

Endurance bring about character. I know it to be so, because so many people who have endured against insurmountable odds are the stuff that defines character. They have an integrity that shows, that inspires, that draws us to them. That makes us want to have what they have and live the way that they live.

Jesus does that. Why did people flock to Him? Because He demonstrated the kind of character that is trustworthy and true no matter what.

I dare say that if we were to ask Jesus about loss, about suffering, about sorrow, about pain, and, yes, about this coronavirus, His first message to us would be to trust in Him. And then His next message would be to do all we can. And then His next message would be to rely upon Him. And His next message would be to rely upon using what He has given to us, for good.

There is a balance, an integrity of being, that comes when we receive and give, when we wait and when we act, when we think and when we feel, that makes for a wholeness, a goodness, a peace that passes understanding. May you have that peace, now and always. Amen.