

"A HERO'S RETURN"

Genesis 2:5-7, 18-20

July 29, 2018

At the time GOD made Earth and Heaven, before any grasses or shrubs had sprouted from the ground—GOD hadn't yet sent rain on Earth, nor was there anyone around to work the ground (the whole Earth was watered by underground springs)—GOD formed Man out of dirt from the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life. The Man came alive—a living soul!

GOD said, "It's not good for the Man to be alone; I'll make him a helper, a companion." So GOD formed from the dirt of the ground all the animals of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the Man to see what he would name them. Whatever the Man called each living creature, that was its name. The Man named the cattle, named the birds of the air, named the wild animals; but he didn't find a suitable companion.

CBS News in 2015 posted an article about the domestication of dogs in the world. Atlantic Magazine about the same time posted another article on the same subject, attempting to trace the origin of the dog as companion to humans. Both concluded that the first evidence of domesticated wolves dates to the Neolithic period 15,000 years ago, when humans learned to use crops, livestock, and animal helpers to improve their lives and survivability.

Cultural evidence teaches us that dogs are descended from the gray wolf and that they were undergoing this transformation from predator to companion in what is now Europe and simultaneously, also in

Asia. Most of our present dog breeds actually come from the Asian wolf-dog line.

In cave dwelling times, domesticated wolves proved valuable to humans in that they could protect the entrance of the dwelling from other predators. They were invaluable as hunters also. Being able to smell game from long distances away well out of eyesight, they were fast, experienced trackers, and able killers. The wolf was already a social animal that had learned to live in family groups. A little enticement with food and a warm fire and they were rather easily converted into loyal pets who helped to sustain their new family units.

Cats have a different story, as they would of course insist on. Some argue that cats have never really been domesticated! They descended from five separate cat species, the African Wildcat being the one from which our housecats descended. They probably originated about 9500 years ago in the Fertile Crescent just north of the Syrian Desert. Egyptians likely introduced them into Northern Europe on their travels abroad.

As farmers developed the ability and knowledge about how to store grains, rodents were attracted to the grain reserves and wild cats were, in turn, attracted to the rodents. Farmers learned that it was a good idea to feed and shelter the wild cats so that they would stick around and cull out the pesky rodents.

Eventually many of these wild cats became fat and happy house cats. And as we know by experience these cats, newcomers on the scene where domesticated dogs already were comfortably sleeping inside by their masters, quickly took over and kicked the dogs off the couches as they took their rightful place as kings and queens of the household.

Our pets.... our companions.... members of the family.... better than friends, better than relatives, better at times even than spouses and children, our pets never talk bad about us or to us; they give us their attention when WE want it; they are gracious when we fail them; they are loving even when we aren't. Our pets-they represent God for us in so many ways.

To know a pet's love and devotion is to know God's love and devotion for us as well. They enhance our lives, they greet us and forgive our leaving them when we return home, they snuggle with us and perform for us, play with us, and keep our minds and bodies active. They grace our lives, and then all too soon they leave us, breaking our hearts in tiny little shattered pieces until we think we will never breathe again or be able to open our home to another pet. They are a gift to us from the heavens, and then the heavens rob us of our joy.... Until the next time our hearts melt at the kitten or puppy we carry home in our arms.

There are many other animals who are pets, I know. Birds, gerbils, snakes, horses, goats, turtles, bunnies, ducks.... the list goes on, but the stories about how they affect us are of the same effect.

I invite you now to turn to someone near you, in groups of two or three, and share the photographs and memories of a pet of yours—from your childhood or your adult past, or from right now. [If you are reading this at home, I invite you to stop reading, sit back in your chair, and remember your beloved pets from years past, or say a blessing to those who grace your lives now.] Spend a couple of minutes, and then yield to another in your group. I'll be back to you in 6 minutes....

I was born into a family with Chihuahuas. Chico, Sparky, Popo, Perry, and Max. I remember only Chico and Sparky. Over the years I have loved Freckles and Tizzy, Tina and Josie, Nicky, Sonny and Brandy, Foundher and Buck, Saxxy and Jasmine, Ayla and Rajah, Eiger and Shunka, and now Jake and Kona who were laying quietly by my side as I wrote Friday. And those are only my immediate family members. None of them saved my life in a dramatic way as did tonight's movie dog, Rex, and yet, all of them did in their own way.

Megan Leavey is an angry young woman who has lost her best friend, a party buddy who overdosed to death. She is restless, directionless, and just bull-headed enough to join the Marines. In the

Corps, she fails to take her commitment seriously, a mistake that lands her on latrine duty in the service animal pens.

There, God's Spirit touches her with an interest in training the dogs used as bomb-sniffers in the Middle East war zone. There also, God graces her with Rex, her alter ego German Shepherd. Aggressive and defiant, he is her and she is him and together they heal their angry hearts.

Our film tonight is about more than a dog-and-human story. It is about loyalty. It is about heroism. And it is about selflessness. Difficult to watch at times but worth it in the end, this movie reminds us how lucky we are—the humans—to be able to learn from the ones we say are dumb, our wise teachers, our pets.

Our Sacred Text tells us that God made the human and realized the human was lonely. Trees and fish and blue sky and soft grasses, fruit and water and shady trees and warm caves all helped, but it was not until God made animals that Human had companionship. Human just did not recognize the opportunity that was given in animals. It took until Human learned to use tools to understand how animals—specifically the gray wolf—could be brought into the family to provide protection, additional warmth, hunting expertise, and as a playmate.

Our stories all are different and personal to us, yet they are all the same, aren't they? I wonder how Jesus would have been softened and comforted by a pet dog who could travel with him all those long.

lonely miles he was forced to walk alone. I wonder if such an animal would have stayed awake with him in the Garden of Gethsemane as he agonized and prayed the whole night long. I wonder if a dog would have kept vigil at Calvary and at the burial tomb as we know stories of dogs who have demonstrated that very loyalty for other masters. I find it curious that dogs and cats were domesticated and located in Jesus' time and place, and yet, the New Testament never tells even one story of them. I find that rather sad.

Look how enriched our life stories are because of our pets. In the New Testament, domesticated cats are never mentioned—not even once, and the three references to dogs in the Gospels all paint them in a negative light:

Luke 16:21 tells the story of the poor man Lazarus, who day after day lay at the gate of a rich man, "longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table." The text tells us that, "Even the dogs came and licked his sores."

In Matthew 15:26, the story of the Canaanite woman who stands up to Jesus and demands his blessing, Jesus likens her to a dog and denies her.

He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

And in Matthew 7:6, our Lord is even more pointed when he warns the people, "Do not give **dogs** what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces."

Hmmm. On this point, I beg to differ with Jesus, in practice if not in belief. I don't know about you, but sometimes my dogs eat

pretty well! I give my dogs what is sacred: my time, my devotion, my love, and more often than I should, a bite or two of my dinner.

My animals have taught me about the limitless nature of God's love, and I think that is pretty sacred. The bond is not built around greed or manipulation or expectation. The love exists in the here and now and it is real. It is palpable. It is life-affirming and life-saving. It was that way between Megan Leavey and her Marine dog, Rex. Dramatic though their story may have been, it is no richer than the stories you have shared today.

Let's do this. If you have a pet at home, when you return today give her or him some special attention. An extra walk. A play session in the yard. When I go home today, tired though I will be, Jakey will stare at me and stare at me seeking eye contact until I go into the back yard with him and throw his rubber rings for him to retrieve. He is in love with those silly rings. Kona will use the opportunity to eat grass and run aimlessly around the yard. They will be ecstatically happy, and I will have had a bonus opportunity to be with God. If I allow myself to set aside my tiredness and return to my Boyz just a little of the love they show me each and every day, we all will be blessed in our connection.

Jesus, you teach us much about how to live a compassionate, loving, servant life. You healed many and you included more at God's table. You showed us substance over form, and you welcomed the poor,

the bereft, and the child into your waiting arms. But you missed the boat on this one, Brother, and today I am sorry you never knew the love of a pet.

May God bless the animals one and all, especially those living on the streets and those languishing in shelters hoping against hope that this is the day they will be invited into their forever home.

May they all be saved so that they in turn, might save us.

Amen.