

“Animal Planet,”

25 September 2005

Bible Passage: Genesis 1:24, 25 (*New Living Translation*)

Then God said, “Let the earth bring forth every kind of animal—domestic and wild, large and small. And so it was. And God saw that it was good.”

The last time we did a message about the beloved animals in our lives was four or five years ago. At that time, our household had been without a pet for several years. We’d had two dogs—Widget, a little beagle who died at the ripe old age of 16, and a little cockapoo named Paddington P. Puppy Dog, who got loose and was run over and killed. Then there was Loppy, our lop-eared rabbit, who was with us a year or so before moving to a new home. Frankly, Mike and I were quite content being without a pet, but we had been thinking about changing that when our lives slowed down a bit.

That decision was altered a year and a half ago when our daughter presented me with a picture of a cute little black and white kitten. The inscription on the picture said, “Happy Birthday. Will you be my Mommy?” Mike’s response was that we didn’t need a pet, and he was right: we didn’t *need* a pet.

However, this was a gift from our daughter to me. How could I turn it down? That would have been very ungrateful, so she and I made the trek down to visit the kitten, and a few days later, home he came with us. Mike was surprised when he came home that evening, and there was this cute little kitten who endeared himself to Mike immediately, and that’s how Harley became a much loved member of our household.

In the time that has elapsed since he joined us, I have to tell you that he has been a delight. He’s a source of company; he loves to be right where we are. It’s fun to watch him play, and to play with him. He causes us to laugh, and it’s so great having him greet us at the door when we come home. He has been a great addition to our lives.

Having a kitten as a daily presence has reaffirmed for me the truth of our Bible passage for today. This is part of the first creation story in the first book of the Bible, Genesis. It reads like this: “Then God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth every kind of animal—domestic and wild, large and small.’ And so it was. And God saw that it was good.” That really says it all. God wanted there to be animals on the face of the earth, and God understood their importance, and that it was good to have them among us.

Many of us already knew that animals play an important role in our lives. An unknown person wrote an essay on the importance of pets, and was reflecting on the death of their dog, and how friends would sometimes say, “Oh for heaven’s sake...he was only a dog!” The woman wrote: “I beg to differ. He was family. He loved us. He was devoted to my children. He had a personality and a sense of humor. And he trusted us implicitly.”

Those of you who are Gardeners at The Garden at Oak Hill have a church dog—Andy. Not long ago, Richard Higgins, Andy’s daddy, saw someone from there when he was out and about. The person said to him, “You’re from The Garden, right?” And Richard said “yes” that was right. The guy went on, “How’s Andy? We haven’t seen him for a while!” Andy has become Oak Hill’s dog. Let’s see what Andy has to say... (video)

Another Andy, Andy Rooney had a few thoughts about the dogs and cats that play such

an important role in our lives. Here are some of his astute observations about our pets:

- A dog is the only thing on earth that loves you more than he loves himself.
- An aquarium is just interactive TV for cats.
- Cat's motto: No matter what you've done wrong, always try to make it look like the dog did it.
- Buy a dog a toy and it will play with it forever. Buy a cat a present and it will play with the wrapper for 10 minutes.
- Dogs and cats instinctively know the exact moment their owners will wake up. Then they wake them 10 minutes sooner.
- Dogs have owners. Cats have staff.
- Don't accept your dog's admiration as conclusive evidence that you are wonderful.

Those sayings are good for a smile, and they embody some truths about the role that pets play in our lives.

Three women from right here at The Garden know about the importance of animals, and their organization was featured in the *Indianapolis Star* a while back. They run a group that rescues animals from difficult situations and places them in good homes. Dee Caldwell, Becky Teeguarden and Crystal Harpring's group calls itself "Plum Crazy"; that's because some folks think they're crazy for doing what they do, but they are totally committed to their cause. Over the years, they have helped llamas, donkeys, horses, cattle and puppies, and they're very particular about the new homes for these animals, subjecting the recipients to intense scrutiny to be assured that the animals will be well cared for. The vet who worked with them for years said, "It's just a group that's an animal's best friend."

There are many reasons that pets are good for us. Obviously, they provide companionship. And they can help us through some tough situations. If we've had a bad day, or if we're struggling with a problem, a pet becomes a good sounding board. We can talk it out, and we don't feel quite so crazy talking to our dog or cat as we might feel if we were talking to ourselves. Pets can comfort us if we're down or sad. They're just wonderful additions to our lives.

There have been some medical studies done that emphasize the important role that our pets can play in both our physical and mental wellbeing. It's been documented that they can help lower our blood pressure and our heart rate. They can help boost our immune systems, causing people who have pets to tend to make fewer visits to the doctor. Having a pet in our lives gives us a better survival rate when faced with a life-threatening disease. And pets help us have a healthier lifestyle, because we get more exercise and have a way to alleviate some of the stress that builds up in us.

Most of us are aware of the significance of pets to those who are faced with disabilities. One of the organizations that has been a 10% recipient from The Garden works with kids in learning to ride horses, and finds that the animals are therapeutic in those situations. Ask anyone who has lost sight what it's like, like Cathy Burke and her best friend, Sasha. Sasha is a set of eyes for Cathy, and helps her live in a more positive and life-giving way. (Video)

As much as animals help our physical and mental well-being, I also believe that help us connect with something beyond ourselves, and they contribute to our spiritual well-being. Len Sweet makes that observation in his book, *Carpe Manana*, as he writes: "...Contact with animals is a sacred thing—because they know something we don't..." I don't know what that is exactly,

except that as Sweet says, they haven't had to give up something in order to know instinctively and naturally that which is real and true. Animals are who they are, and they can inspire us to be who we are when we're with them.

In her book, *A Year by the Sea*, author Joan Anderson uses a quote by an Inuit woman to describe how animals can connect us to God. This is what the woman said, "Animals may aid us in our everyday lives, in our dreams, meditations. Since they were created before humans, they are closer to THE SOURCE and can act as allies, guides, and familiars in our search for wholeness." Animals do help us have a sense of the oneness of all creation with the Creator; they connect to God in a powerful way.

One of you sent me a story that pretty well says it all. Although it has one of those weird pictures of heaven, there is a very basic truth at the heart of the story. It's a story of a man and his dog who were walking along a road. The man was enjoying the scenery, when it suddenly occurred to him that he was dead. He remembered dying, and that the dog walking beside him had been dead for years. Then he wondered where the road was leading them.

After a while, they came to a high white stone wall that looked like fine marble. At the top of a long hill was a tall arch that glowed in the sunlight. As he was standing before it, he saw a magnificent gate in the arch that looked like mother of pearl, and the road inside looked like pure gold. As they approached the gate, they saw someone sitting at a desk to one side. He asked the man, "Where are we?" "This is heaven, sir," was the answer. "Wow! Would you happen to have some water?" the man asked. "Of course, sir. Come right in, and I'll have some ice water brought right up." "Can my friend," gesturing toward his dog, "come in, too?" "I'm sorry, sir, but we don't accept pets." The man thought a moment and then turned back toward the road and continued the way he had been going with his dog.

After another long walk, and at the top of another long hill, he came to a dirt road leading through a farm gate that looked as if it had never been closed. There was no fence. As he approached the gate, he saw a man inside, leaning against a tree and reading a book. "Excuse me!" the traveler called out. "Do you have any water?" "Yeah, sure. There's a pump over there. Come on in." "How about my friend here?" he asked, gesturing to the dog. "There should be a bowl by the pump," was the response.

Sure enough, there inside the gate was an old-fashioned hand pump with a bowl beside it. The traveler filled his dog's water bowl, and then took a long drink himself. When they were both full, he and the dog walked back toward the man who was standing by the tree. "What do you call this place?" the traveler asked. "This is heaven," the guy answered. "Well, that's confusing," said the traveler. "The man down the road said that was heaven, too." "Oh, you mean the place with the gold street and pearly gates? Nope. That's hell."

"Doesn't it make you mad for them to use your name like that?" the traveler asked. "No, we're just happy that they screen out the folks who would leave their best friends behind."

Our pets can indeed become our best friends, because they know a secret that we're all still trying to learn. Linda Case is a lecturer in animal sciences at the University of Illinois, and she has a sense of what that secret is. She is deeply committed to the positive power of pets in our lives, and says that they are some of the best teachers of the most important lesson in life. She said, "They teach me to love unconditionally. The pets don't care if I have a bad hair day or put on

five pounds. They love me just the way I am and I love them for who they are.” How fortunate we are to have pets in our lives that demonstrate the gift of unconditional love.

Closing:

What a great gift our pets offer us, and I thank God that they were created to be our companions through life.

Have a good Sunday and go in peace. Amen.