



## **The Blessing of a Pet Memorial Garden: St. Stephens Burnaby: October 2020**

**Archbishop Melissa Skelton**

### **From the Book of Job**

- <sup>7</sup> ‘But ask the animals, and they will teach you;  
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;  
<sup>8</sup> ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;  
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.  
<sup>9</sup> Who among all these does not know  
that the hand of the Lord has done this?  
<sup>10</sup> In his hand is the life of every living thing  
and the breath of every human being.

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In writer Rick Bass’s book about his dog named Colter, Bass describes how he came to own his dog.

Some neighbours had a female dog that had a litter of puppies. One day when the puppies were a little older, one of the neighbours drove over in her truck to borrow a cup of sugar with the mother dog and the two remaining puppies in the front seat. One of the puppies was stocky and well built. The other, according to Bass, was “bony, cross-legged, pointy-headed and goofy looking.” The good-looking puppy was already spoken for. And before he knew it, Rick had written a check for the second puppy—the funny looking one.

And this is what Bass said about the moment he decided to do that:

He said: “How we fall into grace. You can’t work or earn your way into it. You just fall. It lies below. It lies beyond. It comes to you unbidden.”

Oh Rick—you nailed it. When with fear and trembling or with impulsiveness or with great joy we decide to invite a pet into our home and into our lives, we fall into grace, a grace we did not work or earn our way into. It is a grace that lies below and beyond. It comes to us unbidden and comes to us in ways we could have never arranged for ourselves.

And this is really what a life in God is all about, isn't it? We make decisions, not all of them well-advised, about the people we love, the jobs we take and the pets we allow into our lives. And then from these decisions we are propelled upon a journey full of challenges, full of new things to learn and full of the many graces that come our way from these seemingly simple, little decisions that are God's opportunity to teach us, to challenge us and to bless us.

This is what the writer of the Book of Job seems to be telling us in that wonderful passage we heard just a moment or two ago. All of life, to include our relationships with animals, proceeds from the hand of the living God, the Creator who has made the world and all that is in it. And as this same writer points out, within that world, you and I have much to learn from animals, especially from those we choose to live with day in and day out.

I made the decision to invite my dog Teddy into my life at a really low moment in my life—now some 12 years ago. In the midst of getting a divorce, I just made the decision. I called the breeder first and then drove down to her house in the southern part of Washington State. Once there, I picked out this little fluffy, headstrong, male Westie puppy and took him home with me.

At first I felt completely incompetent to care for him. But over time I learned more from Teddy about standing my ground than I had from any assertiveness training. I learned more from Teddy about curiosity than any class I had ever taken. I learned more from Teddy about constancy than I had learned from some of my relationships with human beings. And this is to say nothing about what I learned from Teddy about devotion, about physical closeness, about being alert to the natural world, about finding peace in the midst of anxiety, about joy, and about play. I learned a lot about play!

What have you learned from your animal companions?

Tonight we are blessing a pet memorial garden, a place where people like you and me can place the ashes of the pets we have loved and can remember all that they have meant to us. When we do this, we are, of course, remembering and honouring the relationship we and others had with a specific animal who had a specific name that we had given him or her.

Let's say some of those names out loud now.

But I also believe that we are doing something else. We are acknowledging and, yes, celebrating the grace that is poured out upon us from the hand of a Creator who gives us the world and its animals as companions and teachers. And we are remembering that through the coming of Jesus, we have been called into relationship with all parts of the creation—people, places and creatures—all parts of the creation, parts that are like us and, importantly, parts that are not like us, and through that unlikeness we are given something we cannot give ourselves alone. For...

“He is the Way. Follow him through the Land of Unlikeness;  
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.  
Seek him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;  
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.  
Love Him in the World of the Flesh.  
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.”

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W. H. Auden, *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*