

Psalm 124

¹ If it had not been the Lord who was on our side
—let Israel now say—
² if it had not been the Lord who was on our side,
when our enemies attacked us,
³ then they would have swallowed us up alive,
when their anger was kindled against us;
⁴ then the flood would have swept us away,
the torrent would have gone over us;
⁵ then over us would have gone
the raging waters.

⁶ Blessed be the Lord,
who has not given us
as prey to their teeth.
⁷ We have escaped like a bird
from the snare of the fowlers;
the snare is broken,
and we have escaped.

⁸ Our help is in the name of the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.

If It Had Not Been the Lord

Today we blessed our pets. Have you ever wondered what the world looks like through the eyes of your pet? I'm sure you have. I think about our dog Archie and our bird Zazoo a lot. And I think that animals see the world in a similar way to us, and maybe we see the world in a similar way to animals. We use expressions like "It's a dog-eat-dog world," "It's a jungle out there," "It's a rat race," "While the cat's away the mice will play."

Of course there is a difference between us and our pets; we exercise authority over our pets, unless they're cats. I think we are looked upon as gods by our pets...unless they're cats. We are the ones who provide for our pets, and who keep our pets safe and out of harm's way.

And I would say that we can find a similarity between the way we provide for our pets and God provides for us. The second part of the psalm that we just read describes Israel as a bird that is saved from being eaten by another animal – have you ever saved your pet from the teeth of another animal? The psalmist describes Israel as escaping from the snare of the fowlers – have you ever rescued your pet from a snare, or from a cage? Whenever I go to a pet store or an animal rescue shelter my heart goes out to all those cats and dogs living in cages. Today, in honor of our pets past and present, I want to work with this analogy and help us recognize that our dependence upon God is no less than our pets' dependence upon us. I want us to praise God for truly being our rescuer, because "if it had not been the Lord," we would be nothing.

Being a pet is a mixed bag; on the one hand your food and water and shelter are provided, but on the other hand you lack a degree of freedom, you don't always get to hang out with your own breed – you have to deal with humans who may give you some freedom but also place restrictions on you – Zazoo can come out of his cage during the day, but he gets his wings clipped and gets locked up at night. When he flies off his cage he usually gets sprayed from a water bottle until he flies or waddles back to his cage. Archie too has freedom during the day, but at night he is “caged” back by the washing machine, and whenever we take him outside he's on a leash and gets yanked around a lot – I have to avert his eyes from anything that moves because to Archie everyone is a friend with whom he wants to associate. Do Archie and Zazoo live a good life? We try to make it a good life within limits; we want our pets to be “happy,” but we also want them to be safe, and we want our home to stay clean (we have a robot pet called a Roomba that helps us with that). We impose laws on our pets for the same reason God imposes laws upon us; to keep us happy and healthy and safe and prevent us from hurting ourselves or one another. A few weeks ago I talked about the Law, given to us *because* we as humans couldn't live peacefully among ourselves on this big, abundant planet we call earth. We are prone to hurt each other and we need laws to prevent that from happening.

And I said that we needed to meditate on the Law day and night. That's like going to obedience school. We need those basic commandments drilled into our heads like a dog needs to have words like “no,” “heel,” “sit,” and “stay” drilled into their brains until commands like “you shall not covet” are second nature to us. Studying the law is nothing more than training ourselves to live a safe, joyful, and abundant life on this earth and in each other's company.

There are parallels between God's commandments that he gives to humanity and the commandments that we give to our pets. The first commandment of that Law of Moses is to recognize God as the *only* God, the focus of our devotion, our gratitude, and our worship. That's like knowing the hand that feeds you. You know, Archie and I have a very close relationship in part because Archie knows that it's my hands that usually feed him, and so when I forget to fill his food bowl, he reminds me; I'm usually sitting in my office reading or working on the computer, and because Archie knows that one of the Laws is “Thou shalt not bark without good cause” he will come and look at me. If I don't get the hint, he'll walk back to his food bowl, nudge it with his nose until I hear the sound of the porcelain bumping the tile floor, then he'll return to the office and look at me. Archie knows from whence his food comes, and he approaches me when he has need. Likewise if he needs to go do his doggy business, he pulls the same routine, only instead of walking back and forth to his food bowl he walks to the front door. If I don't get the hint he lets out a little doggie whine. After he's been fed or relieved he often joins me on the couch in the office, and sometimes he starts to lick my hand; I think that's his way of expressing gratitude. If I'm gone for several...minutes...Archie will come up to me and attempt to climb me. That's him lifting his paws to say “Halleluiah!” We too need to recognize the hand of God that feeds us, just as we need to have the same level of trust in God that our pets have in us.

The truth is that we often *don't* have such trust in God, and we don't show our gratitude to God for all that God does for us. From time to time I take Archie into the back yard without a leash...usually if the weather is good and I'm just taking the trash to the garbage can, or if James has lots of friends around and they want to throw the ball around for Archie to play with. Well

once I took Archie out when there happened to be a rabbit within sight of the back door, and Archie flew into the woods in pursuit of this new potential friend – or meal. I pursued him in vain and after searching and calling I gave up as by now it was dark. The next morning I received a call from the shelter – they had Archie, who they described as an eccentric dog – I considered that a compliment. Archie was quite glad to see me and return home. Well the point is that we go chasing rabbits as well. We forget that our “master” gives us safety and security in his presence, and we forsake that safety and security in order to chase other things. Those pursuits can lead us into danger and even death. Among the common “rabbits” that we chase are fame, fortune, and power. We can all think of celebrities who self-destructed at a young age, of those whose pursuit of wealth has led them to cross ethical boundaries and landed them in jail, and those for whom personal power has become so important that it becomes impossible for them to have any real friends as everyone around them is so afraid of their power that they guard everything they say and do. There are those who find themselves so far from home and so afraid of all the evil they see around them that they end up addicted to drugs or alcohol. And they are in need of someone, perhaps someone like you or me, to point them in the direction of home, or take them back to the place where their true needs are tended to.

I’m sure more than a few pets feel the same way about us as the psalmist feels about God; “If it had not been for the Lord...” How many of you have rescue pets? You’d think that your pet would be grateful to you for saving them from the abuse that they once endured. Well I think it would be good for us to see ourselves as “rescue humans.” Really! What have we done for our pets that God hasn’t done for us? And where would we be without God? I think we should take some time to think about that. We can get too used to waking up in the morning, cooking breakfast, going to work, having lunch, coming home, having dinner, watching TV, playing with the kids, but do we ever stop and say, “Had it not been the Lord”? God doesn’t just provide us with the food and the water and the shelter and toys that keep us alive and entertained; God provides us with life itself. Let us show the same affection toward God that our pets show to us...okay, maybe not cats, though cats do purr. Let us recognize that had it not been the Lord we would be in a terrible state.