

## Pet Blessing–Francistide, 2005

“All you beasts wild and tame, bless the Lord, praise and exalt him above all forever”

Surely one of the most enjoyable services of the year, as we come together to worship here at the cathedral, is this evensong celebrating the feast of St. Francis of Assisi at which we bless our pets. Last Fall was my first experience of this service, and I still have on my desk a picture of our puppy, then only 3 months old, sitting next to me in the nave looking very delighted with herself—and very much in need of a blessing.

Why is it, I wonder, that this service holds such meaning for us? A lot of it has to do, I think, with the fact that it allows us the opportunity to celebrate how much these furry, feathery, scaley creatures mean to us, how significant a part of our lives they are, genuine members of our families and even more than celebrate it, to bring them into this sacred space to ask God’s blessing on them while we do it.

That we do this during Francistide is wonderfully appropriate. Among the greatest of Francis’s gifts was his awareness of how God’s revelation is to be found in all created things. And so, we hear of him moving a worm out of the center of the road for fear that it would be trampled, and of helping a much-feared wolf to solve its food problems so that it wouldn’t be such a threat to the neighborhood. For Francis, this evening’s gospel was a lived reality: that God who has hidden so much from those who think themselves wise and clever is fully prepared to reveal Himself to us if only we put ourselves in the position of children, seeing the wonder of God’s revelation in all of creation, and not simply in the places we’re accustomed to looking.

If we stop to consider it, aren’t our pets so often places where God is revealed? Our bunnies and birds, our turtles and toads, our kittens and puppies, all of them are windows to God. They teach us about virtues like loyalty and trust, because these creatures are so simply there for us, and put their faith in us. It doesn’t matter whether we’ve had a bad day—or a bad year. It doesn’t matter how much we make or what our job title is or whether we finally got the corner office. They love us like God loves us, just as we are. And, in return, they draw out of us the best we have. I find myself reflecting more than occasionally on the bumper sticker I once saw, “May I

become the person my dog thinks I am.” And in that, they call us to love and care for them as God cares for us, completely and selflessly. And we not only become better people as a result: we come to understand the workings of a loving God more deeply as we’re called to follow that example.

Even more, if your experience is at all like mine, your pets help you to understand the truths of our Christian faith more deeply. Last year, just before Christmas, Lisa and I were asked to take in a golden retriever whose family no longer wanted her. And so Emma, the big red dog sitting in the nave, came to be part of our family. Emma had blotted her copybook rather badly. She had gotten very territorial with food, and had gone after her owners’ new Dalmatian puppy and, we suspect, their toddler as well. She came to us that December day with all her possessions: a frayed collar, a bald tennis ball, and a bed that we later discovered was full of spiders. For the first few days, she was nervous and unsettled in this new place, not very sure about what was going on, and what the future held in store. The third evening after her arrival, I was sitting on the sofa in my office reading, and Emma wandered in. She looked at me, jumped onto the sofa, and put her head down on my knee. And as she went to sleep, I leaned over and whispered to her, “You’re home now, and I’ll never let you go.”

Then, in one of those wonderful, unpredictable moments of revelation, I found myself captured by the Christmas mystery that we were about to celebrate more fully than I ever had been before. For who of us has not, at some point or another blotted his or her copybook, and found ourselves uneasy and perhaps a bit afraid? And in that moment, how often have we heard a loving God, born among us in the mystery of the Incarnation, say to us, “You’re home now, and I’ll never let you go,” and found our lives forever changed. God’s wondrous transforming grace was so real in that moment that I felt I could reach out and touch it, all because of a secondhand retrieving dog.

The catch in all of this, of course, is that we’re challenged to be “naive,” like the infants in our gospel, in order for such revelations to happen. We have to be as simple and straightforward in our relations with God as these rats and tadpoles, fish and frogs, snakes and salamanders, are in their relations with us. As they come to us, just as they are, and ask us for help and reassurance in

their simple needs, so are we called to go to God, without pretense, and lay out the desires of our hearts, as confident that our prayers will be heard as all these creatures are of our loving response to them.

Shortly, we'll bless these members of our families who mean so much to us, asking that God keep them safe, well, and happy during the coming year. But in doing that, let us also give thanks for the countless ways they bless us, and ask our loving God to give us a simplicity of spirit, a purity of heart like theirs, like Francis's, that God's revelation may happen anew in our hearts this evening, and every day.

“Lord God, may we, like Francis, seek you in all your creation, and in so doing, allow ourselves truly to be found by You. Amen.”