

## “The Steadfast Love of Dogs and God”

Theme: The Gospel According to Dogs

Scripture: Lamentations 3:22-24

Things I’d like to remember from today’s sermon

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Family/Community Activity for the week: Enjoy a family movie night! Choose a movie that features dogs as its main characters. You might consider “Milo and Otis,” “Air Bud” or “101 Dalmatians.” (Make sure to offer yummy snacks as you watch the movie!) As you gather to watch the movie, begin by listing some characteristics of God. Qualities of God might include being loving, accepting, kind, helpful and patient. Invite family members to watch for these characteristics in the movie as portrayed by the dogs. When the movie is over, briefly discuss the qualities shared by God and dogs! Pray to become more loving, accepting and kind, just like dogs and God! (Consider inviting friends to join you for this fun activity!)

Meditation Moments for Monday, May 22 - Read Genesis 1:24-28, 2:19-20. “*Dogs are not our whole life, but they make our lives whole,*” Roger Caras (Writer; Photographer) Animals in Bible times were more often valued for their fleeces, milk and hides than as pets. Even in that world, however, the Genesis creation stories said God created all living things, not just humans. The divine command to “take charge” of the animals, as with the rest of life on the planet, meant to care for all that God created, not to abuse or exploit it.

- This sermon series will focus particularly on the qualities that beloved dogs bring into our lives. But given the broader focus of the Genesis creation stories, have there been times when some other animal (e.g. a majestic hawk, a baby giraffe) made you aware of God’s loving creativity?
- In what ways (besides buying quality dog food) do you seek to care for the animal creation God loves (cf. Jonah 4:6-11)? Are there any parts of life in which you are indifferent to the pain or suffering of certain animals, or even find it entertaining to see certain animals hurt? To what extent have you thought about God’s charge for you to care for the animals God created?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, what a wonderfully varied world you created, teeming with so many kinds of life. Help me to value the creation you love, and to be a responsible, caring steward of it. Amen.*

Tuesday, May 23 - Read Psalm 13:3-6, Hebrews 13:5-8. *“The world would be a nicer place if everyone had the ability to love as unconditionally as a dog,”* M.K. Clinton (Author) We humans talk a lot about “unconditional love,” and sometimes pledge it to one another. But unconditional love is so demanding that we very seldom live up to it. Our dogs, on the other hand, often seem to manage it. And when they do, they show us one of the key qualities of God that the Scriptures taught. We can always depend on God’s love for us.

- Sometimes we quote Hebrews 13:5 as though it is just about money. But this passage was about in what or in who we put our trust. Are there experiences you look back on and realize that the fear you felt at the time was unnecessary, that you could trust God? How can you apply the principles of this passage to any current circumstances triggering fear in you?
- If you’ve had a dog (or other pet) who was always there for you, imagine that dependable loyalty multiplied by being embodied in the God of the universe. Do you tend to see God as absent when you need God most, as sort of dependable (because they say so in church), or as a genuinely reliable presence whose steadfast love is with you at all times and in all circumstances?

Prayer: *Dear Jesus, thank you for being with me right now. Keep me aware of your strong, loving presence, today and every day. Amen.*

Wednesday, May 24 - Read Lamentations 3:19-24. *“I think dogs are the most amazing creatures; they give unconditional love. For me, they are the role model for being alive,”* Gilda Radner (Comedienne) Some days are bright, sunny, filled with joy, hope and love. But other days are dark, sad, scary, filled with fear or anger or tears. Dog lovers know that their canine pals usually seem to know when the dark days come, and if anything, to draw closer at those times. In that, they reflect the truth the writer of Lamentations had learned in the rubble of Jerusalem: “the faithful love of the Lord hasn’t ended.”

- The Babylonian army had flattened Jerusalem—burning the city, and gutting Solomon’s beautiful temple. Amid the terrible scenes of the conquered city, Lamentations’ writer still found God’s compassion. When do you find it hardest to sense Jesus with you? How can the promise that God’s mercies are new every morning bring you strength and courage, even in those darkest of days?
- Most of us can relate to experiences that feel like “bitterness and poison.” But too often, although we might accept the faithful friendship of a dog as worth having even in those times, we think God is only worthwhile if the circumstances change. To what extent have you learned, even in dire circumstances, to lean on and rely on “the faithful love of the Lord”?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, here I am, and you know what I’m carrying on my heart and in my consciousness today. And here you are, always, loving me and giving me strength for whatever I face. Thank you. Amen.*

Thursday, May 25 - Read Acts 13:38-39. *“To err is human—to forgive, canine,”* (Unknown) One reason so many of us love dogs so much is that dogs are wonderfully forgiving creatures. They are seemingly always ready to wag their tail and lick our hand even after we’ve messed up. Dogs’ forgiving natures, it turns out, are just a pointer to the nature of their creator. When Paul preached in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, the central fundamental Christian message he shared was “forgiveness of sins.”

- When we fail to be all that we think we should be, all that we know God wants us to be, we tend to be hard on ourselves. Our hearts condemn us. But Scripture said, “God is greater than our hearts” (cf. 1 John 3:20), and even more than our canine pets, God forgives us. Is there something you are having trouble forgiving yourself for? If so, claim God’s forgiveness, and let Jesus restore you to a right relationship with God.
- Hmmm—a “right relationship with God” suggests that there might be a wrong relationship with God. What do you think that might look like? Could at least one form of it be a relationship that sees God as angry, unhappy with us all the time, and demanding all kinds of harsh self-punishment (cf. Colossians 2:20-23)? What do you think is the difference between healthy self-control and a destructive life-and-joy denying attitude?

Prayer: *O Jesus, you forgave and forgave. Even on the cross, you prayed forgiveness for the Roman soldiers hammering nails through your wrists. Thank you for your willingness to forgive me when I blow it. Amen.*

Friday, May 26 - Read Luke 15:17-24. *“One of the happiest sights in the world comes when a lost dog is reunited with a master he loves. You just haven’t seen joy till you have seen that,”* Eldon Roark (Journalist; Author) There is nothing restrained or dignified about the way a dog who loves you welcomes you home after you’ve been away for a while. In Jesus’ day, patriarchs, heads of household, did NOT run—people thought it most undignified. But when the long-absent son in Jesus’ story showed up on the road home, his father ran to greet him. God isn’t worried about being dignified—God is thrilled any time you take a step toward home.

- In Jesus’ story, the once cocky young man had hit bottom. He had no list of demands—he just hoped for a square meal in the servants’ quarters. What does it do for you to have your dog greet you exuberantly when you come dragging home after a bad day? What does it say to your heart to picture God racing down the road to embrace you, even when you are dragging yourself home to God?
- The son despondently said, “I no longer deserve to be called your son.” The father wasn’t worried about “deserving,” any more than your dog is keeping score to see if you deserve a welcome. If being part of God’s family is not primarily about deserving, then what is it about? If it is not about deserving, then what moves you to change your life in positive ways when you are welcomed into the family?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, as the old hymn put it, I have a “wandering heart.” But I want to keep turning back toward home. And I rejoice to know that you are always eager to welcome me, even when I’ve wandered. Amen.*

Saturday, May 27 - Read Isaiah 11:6-9. *“Heaven goes by favor. If it went by merit, you would stay out and your dog would go in,”* Mark Twain (Author) Of course, we wonder: will this canine companion who has become so woven into my heart and my life be with me in eternity? It is not a silly or trivial question. It takes us back to the creation—to say our pets vanish from eternity would suggest that God is only interested in human beings, not in all creation. At least so the prophet Isaiah’s lyrical picture of God’s eternal “holy mountain” clearly suggested. He saw a whole collection of animals living in peace and joy with one another, and with humans, in God’s eternity.

- Is there one or more animal friend from your past that you particularly look forward to meeting again in eternity? If there is more than one, are you grateful that the prophet envisioned all kinds of animals living in harmony with one another and with humans (even little children)? Does it make sense to you that the God who created and loved animals in the first place would include them in a world made new?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, thank you for Isaiah’s vision of the future. Guide me safely to that future, in which your power and love will reunite me with those I have loved, human and animal. Amen.*

***Theme: The Gospel According to Dogs***  
***“The Steadfast Love of God and Dogs”***

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber

May 20-21, 2017 at First United Methodist Church, Durango

**Scripture: Lamentations 3:19-24**

*19 The thought of my suffering and homelessness is bitter beyond words. 20 I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my loss. 21 Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: 22 The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. 23 Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning. 24 I say to myself, “The Lord is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him!”*

**VIDEO**                    **Sermon Intro**

**SLIDE**                    **“The Steadfast Love of God and Dogs”**

I invite you to take out of your bulletin your Message Notes and your Meditation Moments. You will find a place to take notes at the top and I hope you will write down at least the few main points of the sermon today and anywhere else you feel this message speaks to you. Continued there and on the back side you will find daily Scripture readings which tie back into today’s message, as well as a daily quote about dogs that are both humorous and inspirational. I hope you’ll take the time to read the Bible daily on your own because I think you will find these verses to be encouraging and speak to our lives today.

The sermon series on which we are em “barking” on today is meant to be both lighthearted and have some depth. While it might seem silly on the surface to have a sermon series about dogs, I also know that I have learned much from the dogs I have owned about my faith and myself and God.

It may seem sacrilegious to talk about God and comparing God to a dog, but I want to remind us today that the Bible routinely takes

animals and uses them as a way of talking about different characteristics of God. In the Bible, we find God described an eagle who would bear us up on his wings.

**GRAPHIC            An Eagle**

We find Jesus described as a mother hen who would draw her chicks around her and keep them safe.

**GRAPHIC            Mother Hen and Chicks**

The Holy Spirit is described as a dove.

**GRAPHIC            Dove**

In the Hebrew Bible, the Messiah is described as a lion.

**GRAPHIC            Lion**

In the Gospel of John, when John the Baptist sees Jesus, he says, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”

**GRAPHIC            Lamb**

Animals are used to describe God on a regular basis. Only one creature has been said to be made in the image of God, and that is human beings. However, the Scriptures tell us that ALL of creation displays the glory and character of the Creator. If you look hard enough, you will find something in almost every living thing, which points towards some attribute of God or some characteristic of God or displays the glory of God. I think that is clearly true than when it comes to dogs.

I have often wondered if it was one of God’s intentions, in creating dogs, that we might look at them and experience and see something of the character of God. As we begin today, I thought it would be fun to play little game called, “Name that dog.” I have 10 famous dogs we are going to show you, and when you know the name of that dog, shouted out. We’ll see how well we do in recognizing these famous mutts.

<b>GRAPHIC</b>	<b>Rin Tin Tin</b>
<b>GRAPHIC</b>	<b>Lassie</b>
<b>GRAPHIC</b>	<b>Benji</b>
<b>GRAPHIC</b>	<b>Snoopy</b>
<b>GRAPHIC</b>	<b>Petey</b>
<b>GRAPHIC</b>	<b>Scooby Doo</b>
<b>GRAPHIC</b>	<b>Lady and the Tramp</b>
<b>GRAPHIC</b>	<b>Pongo</b>
<b>GRAPHIC</b>	<b>Old Yeller</b>
<b>GRAPHIC</b>	<b>Clifford the Big Red Dog</b>

Of these are some of the most famous dogs, but what connects all of them? They all displayed, at some time or another, covenant love, faithfulness, selflessness, loyalty and a willingness to sacrifice for their human owners. They point us toward that connection between dogs and God.

What I find fascinating, is that when we go to look for stories of dogs online, there are literally millions of them which are inspiring. I was particularly drawn to this story of a puppy who was born in a sewer drainpipe in Spain, alongside his five brothers and one sister. His mother is an Ibizan Hound who at twelve years old had been dumped by her owner and left to fend for herself. She became pregnant and managed to keep all her pups alive. He was born deaf and so he responds to hand motions.

**GRAPHIC            Stray Dog (leave picture up while I talk about him.)**

The adoption website said this about him, ***“He is house-trained and walks beautifully on leash with zero pulling. He is gentle, loving and submissive to one and all. He has zero desire to be anything other than a lovable gorgeous boy. To be happy and help others to be happy***

*too.”*

I was struck by two things about this dog’s story. First, he was at an adoption agency called, “Thomas’ Love,” in the UK. Many of you know that our son’s name was Thomas and he also loved dogs. But the second thing that struck me was his name, which I have never seen given to any other dog or animal or person for that matter.

**GRAPHIC**      **Hesed** (Put name at bottom of picture with dog.)

That’s an odd name, isn’t it? Do you know where that word comes from? It’s actually a Hebrew word that is found in the Bible over 270 times, 240 of which are used to describe God. Hesed is the defining characteristic of God in Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament. Somebody knew their Bible and knew Hebrew well enough to call this dog by this name. You just can’t capture the meaning of the word *hesed* with one English word because it has a variety of meanings.

**SLIDE**      *hesed* = faithfulness, loyalty, sacrificial love

**SLIDE**      *hesed* = selflessness, loving kindness, steadfast love

These words all help us understand the meaning of the word hesed. These words also define what dogs can be in our lives at their very best. They also define for us the nature and character of God. When we find dogs who are faithful, loyal, sacrificial, selfless, kind and loving, we can understand why somebody said that dogs are man’s best friend.

**GRAPHIC**      **A Dog is a Man's Best Friend**

These creatures, somehow, have a special connection with us. There are several basic things I hope we will remember today as we think about dogs in this way, as reflecting hesed, and those characteristics we also attribute to God.

**SLIDE**      **Constant Companionship**

Dogs display for us a sense of constant companionship, and

because of that companionship we feel safe and not alone in the world. I love that about dogs. Dogs love to be around their masters, their owners, their humans. My dogs have this sneaky way of slipping out the front door when we open it and the best way to catch them is to simply open the car door because they do not want to be left behind. They want to be with us wherever we go. They don't understand why they have to stay at home when we get to go somewhere during the day. When we are sitting at home, our dogs are always nearby. They are at our feet at the dinner table or next to us on the couch or on top of us if we will let them. They will follow you around until you pay attention to them, unless they have done something bad and then they hide somewhere!

**GRAPHIC            Jeff and Tess**

I got a dog from the Humane Society when I was in my last year at the University of Colorado in Boulder. She had been abused and it took a while for her to not flinch when I simply lifted my hand up to scratch my head or grab something. As she began to trust me, she would go everywhere with me, including to class. When I left college to go to Iowa State University as a campus ministry intern working with college students, Tess went with me. I was really moving out on my own, farther away than I had ever been from family because I had some in the Denver area when I was in college. But now I was going to a new state where I had never been, working with new people I had never met.

I remember driving across the plains of eastern Colorado and then Nebraska and then into Iowa. We left Nebraska early in the morning and arrived in Iowa on a hot afternoon in June and we both got out of the car and had never felt such humidity. Tess took three steps and collapsed on the grass and looked up at me with eyes that said, "Where have you taken me?"

She lived with me in the basement of the church and was my



constant companion for those two years. I even loaned her out to lonely college students who needed a dog therapy session. There was a back entrance to my apartment and sometimes visitors to the church would end up in that hallway and think my back door was the entrance to the church. We would sometimes hear them come down those stairs and then Tess would begin to bark. One time I heard a kid run back up to his family shouting, "Cujo is in the church!"

Part of what it means to be loyal, is to protect your owner, and even though she was a cute looking Golden retriever, Tess was still very protective of me and eventually of Tami as she came into our lives that next year. I think she liked my dog more than me at first, but that's the nice part of their companionship as well!

This idea of the constant presence of our dogs as companions I believe can be a pointer to One who is really with us all the time; who goes with you to work; who goes with you to the places where your dog can't go. 103 times in the Bible we find God saying that he is with us, and therefore we don't have to be afraid. It's a beautiful picture of our God that is meant to sustain us through challenging times. The Israelites were going into the promised land and Moses says this to them in Deuteronomy 31:8.

**BIBLE**      ***8 Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord will personally go ahead of you. He will be with you; he will neither fail you nor abandon you."***

Dogs can give us a sense of this, but there is a deeper and more profound truth that God walks with us everywhere we go, and he will not fail us or abandon us. God is our strength and our helper and our guide. God has a hold of us and will not let us go. This is what we pray over our children when we baptize them, that God is making a promise and he will walk with us. We can't wash off our baptism and we don't need to be afraid. We call this idea prevenient grace.

**SLIDE**                      **Prevenient Grace**

Whether we realize it or not, God is wooing us and longing for us to know that he loves us. I have friends who are atheist and they will tell me all the reasons why they don't believe in God, and my response is always the same, "Well, God still believes in you and he loves you and there is NOTHING you can do about it." As the Apostle Paul reminds us, nothing can separate us from God's love.

In the last month, I have visited with several longtime members of our church who are in the last stages of their journey in this life. Many of them know it and they are ready for it, and when I visit we talk about their life and their story and the things they want to be remembered for when we do their service. We anoint people with oil, just like we baptize children to welcome them in the family of God, we make the sign of the cross and anoint with oil when it comes close to the time of death. It's a reminder of God's claim upon our lives and God's promises to us that the Holy Spirit we present.

I also remind them of a Psalm many of them want read at their funeral, "Yay though I walk to the valley of the shadow of death, I will not fear, for you are with me." I want them to remember that God is walking with them every day of their journey and they don't have to be afraid because God has a hold of them. God will not let us go and one day we will wake up in the arms of our Savior and he will say to us, "Welcome home." We don't have to be afraid.

The Scriptures don't promise that we won't walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Every one of us in this room will do that someday. The Scriptures don't promise that we won't walk through tragedy or adversity. People are given freedom and they can do horrible things with that freedom, hurting other human beings. This is the world we live in, and the middle of that, God promises to walk through the hell that we walk through. God will not let us go.

I think of those persons who were on the streets of Times Square as a car plowed through the crowd. God was there, in that moment

longing to say to them, “You belong to me. You will be safe in my arms.” That’s one of the promises we find in God’s word.

## **GRAPHIC            Roselle and Salty**

I was reminded of these two guide dogs, Roselle and Salty, who were with their owners in the World Trade Center on 9/11. Michael Hingson and Omar Rivera are their owners. Omar and Salty found themselves on the 71st floor. After refusing to leave Rivera's side, Salty led his owner down 400 stairs. About halfway down, a co-worker, trying to help, tried to take Salty's lead but the dog refused to leave Omar.

Roselle and Michael were on the 75<sup>th</sup> floor and Roselle not only led Michael but all his coworkers, through the smoke filled floor and would not let them get on the elevator. Even though none of the humans could see, Roselle led them safely down more than 500 stairs onto the streets below. The group tried to stay where they were, but Roselle barked feverishly and pulled, taking Michael away from the building. The group followed and just a few moments later the tower came down. It would’ve killed them if they had stayed at the base of the building, but clearly Roselle had other ideas and could sense the imminent danger.

Whenever I read stories like this, I’m not only moved to tears, but I get a bit angry thinking about these horrible things that happen in our world. Somebody, in the name of a twisted interpretation of their religion, thinks it’s okay to take planes and fly them in the buildings, killing innocent people. I find it ludicrous that people think God would ever want that.

God does not want these horrible things to happen, and we have talked about that a lot as a congregation. Things happen in the world that God does not wish to have happen. When these bad things happen, sometimes people say, “It must’ve been the will of God,” or, “It must be part of God’s plan.” Can I just say that that is ridiculous? Over and over again, from the first pages of the Bible, we find people

doing things that God does not want us to do and horrible things happen as a result. God comes to pick up the pieces and redeem the mess that has been made by humanity. The reason these bad things happen is because we live in an imperfect world with humans that are flawed and fragile and sometimes life isn't fair.

As I was thinking about people who want to harm others, either emotionally or physically, and think that somehow that is okay, I was reminded what it would look like if someone were to try and harm my wife or my daughter, and what our dogs might do to them. When a dog recognizes that his owner is in danger, they bare their teeth and begin to snarl and then they will fight if needed. They will fight to the death and you will see the wrath of a dog protecting its owner. I found myself thinking about those who flew the planes in to the buildings and thinking they were going to get 10 virgins as a result of that act and what a rude awakening they would be in for as they face the wrath of God and see God face to face.

We don't like to talk about the wrath of God. Would much rather talk about the love of God, but I want to remind you that the wrath of God is the flipside of God's love. You can't have one without the other. You can't have a God of love without also having a God who gets angry when horrible things are done in his name. Tertullian, a second century church father, put it this way and I think says it best.

**SLIDE**      ***“God can only be completely good, if he is the enemy of the bad, so as to put his love of good into action by hatred of the bad and discharge his wardship of the good by the overthrowing of the bad.”***

When we talk about the wrath of God, we acknowledge that it is not the opposite of God's love but rather an expression of God's love for his children who are being hurt or oppressed or experiencing injustice in their lives, especially when it is done in the name of God. We can't think that we can go around hurting other people emotionally

or physically and that there are no consequences.

What we recognize as Christians, is that the cross is meant to be a picture of how much God loves us because Christ takes upon himself the idea of God's wrath so we can truly be forgiven. The death of Jesus on the cross is meant to wash over us in those moments that we feel like we can't be forgiven because of things that we have done. It's a picture of God's grace and mercy.

One of the things I have always appreciated about dogs is their ability to forgive. We can be mad at them and yell at them and sometimes even smack them on the nose in a burst of anger, and they will still come back and put their head on your lap when your anger subsides and you realize it's just sadness that you don't know what to do with. God is that same sort of abiding presence and friend in our lives and because of that we are not afraid and we are never alone.

Another way we see this lived out by dogs is through a ministry of Lutheran Charities called, "K-9 comfort dogs." These are 120 golden retrievers across 23 states that are in teams of 10 or 12. The dogs are brought by their trainers and owners in to the places where there has been violence or bloodshed or terrible grief.

**GRAPHIC K-9 Comfort Dogs Boston**

**GRAPHIC K-9 Comfort Dogs Dallas**

**GRAPHIC K-9 Comfort Dogs Orlando**

**GRAPHIC K-9 Comfort Dogs Marysville**

**GRAPHIC K-9 Comfort Dogs Newtown**

Some of the dogs are in Times Square today. They were brought in right after the Boston marathon bombing to comfort patients in the hospital. They came to Dallas and were with police officers as well as children who were present during the shootings. They were brought to Orlando to offer comfort for those who had experienced trauma. They came to Marysville, Washington where several children were killed in a

school shooting, as well as Newtown where 20 children lost their lives. They are a part of vigils and they visit people in the hospital. Tim Hirtsner, the president of Lutheran Charities, noted that, ***“The wounded and grieving often find great solace in simply petting the dogs. In some cases, they talk directly to the dogs because they are good listeners. They are confidential. They don’t take notes. They are nonjudgmental. They just love you.”***

I remember as a kid with my dogs and my cat, holding them really close when I was sad or things were going badly in our family with my step father’s alcoholism. They brought me consolation in those moments that seemed so dark. I’m reminded about what Jesus says about the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John, chapter 14.

**BIBLE**      ***27 “I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So, don’t be troubled or afraid.***

He then talks about the Holy Spirit coming and being a comforter. As much as I take solace from my animals in my own life when I’m feeling sad or having a difficult time or experiencing grief or loss, the thing that brings me the greatest deal of comfort is when I take a long walk in the midst of some painful situation, or some moment where I feel disappointed or hurt or wounded in some way, and I have a talk with God. God knows my heart and God knows what I’m feeling in those moments. God knows how hard it is, whatever we are going through. In those moments of walking and talking to God, I really do feel like God is listening and I am able to let go of certain things. Sometimes, I simply get quiet, and I can feel the presence of God holding me and reminding me of the promise that somehow, it will be okay. There’s that great old gospel hymn which captures this idea.

**SLIDE**      **What a friend we have in Jesus,  
all our sins and griefs to bear.  
What a privilege to carry,**

**everything to God in prayer.  
Oh, what peace we often forfeit.  
Oh, what needless pain we bear.  
All because we do not carry,  
everything to God in prayer.**

Those golden retrievers, embody and en flesh the comfort and love of God for human beings in the most tragic of circumstances. That brings us to the passage of Scripture we have before us today. The text is from the book of Lamentations, which is a book of Hebrew poetry. A lament is a kind of poem or prayer in which the person who writes the text is going through something hard or difficult and they complain to God. They lament before God their anxiety, their pain, their brokenness and their hurt. There are 150 Psalms of lament, which means the largest category of Psalms are the complaint Psalms. They begin with words like this from Psalm 13.

**BIBLE**     ***1 O Lord, how long will you forget me? Forever?  
How long will you look the other way?  
2 How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul,  
with sorrow in my heart every day?***

One of the ways we know they are poetry, is because of the indentation in the poetic form. Jesus uttered this poetry of lament from Psalm 22.

**BIBLE**     ***1 My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?  
Why are you so far away when I groan for help?  
2 Every day I call to you, my God, but you do not answer.  
Every night you hear my voice, but I find no relief.***

I love that these are the largest category of Psalms, because it tells us that it's okay to be a human being. Right there, in the middle of the Bible, we find these prayers where people are doubting, questioning and wondering why God seems absent and why God is not helping in times of trouble. But always, in those Psalms of complaints,

they come to a place at the end and they say words like this.

**BIBLE**      *Yet will I trust in your unfailing love.*

I feel this pain, disappointment and uncertainty, but I will still trust in your unfailing love. This is what we find in the entire book of Lamentations. It is an entire book of complaints to God, written about 586 BCE, after the city of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonian armies. The great Temple that Solomon had built was in ruins and torn to the ground. The palace was destroyed and the King watched as his sons were put to death before his eyes and then he was blinded and carried off to Babylon as a slave, along with the leading citizens of Jerusalem who were still alive. Millions had been put to death by the Babylonians during the siege of Jerusalem and the writer of Lamentations came to Jerusalem and saw the smoldering ruins along with piles of bodies. He begins to cry out, "My heart is broken, and I feel his bitterness inside of me." He expresses this in chapter 3, and I want you to notice the shift after the first three verses.

**BIBLE**      *19 The thought of my suffering and homelessness  
is bitter beyond words.*

*20 I will never forget this awful time,  
as I grieve over my loss.*

*21 Yet I still dare to hope  
when I remember this:*

*22 The faithful love of the Lord never ends!  
His mercies never cease.*

*23 Great is his faithfulness;  
his mercies begin afresh each morning.*

*24 I say to myself, "The Lord is my inheritance;  
therefore, I will hope in him!"*

I'm not sure the writer of Lamentations felt those words at that moment. I think it was more a statement of faith. In spite of what I see in front of me, I believe that the steadfast love of the Lord never fails



and will be my inheritance. I believe that God's mercies never come to an end. I believe that God is faithful and I can experience his mercies every morning. **Even with the world falling apart all around me, I will hope in him and I will say it until I finally feel it!**

Those words have been set to music a number of times, and one of my favorites I sometimes sing in the morning and the shower.

**SLIDE**      ***"Great is Thy faithfulness!" "Great is Thy faithfulness!"  
Morning by morning new mercies I see;  
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—  
"Great is Thy faithfulness," Lord, unto me!***

Even though it might be a rough time in my life, as I sing that through in the morning, about the third time through, as it's really ringing in the shower because my voice is warmed up, I begin to believe it and I begin to feel it. There is a peace and a comfort and a consolation and a sense that somehow, someday, it will all be okay, because God is by my side and his steadfast love endures forever. This is what Paul was referring to at the end of Romans, chapter 8.

**BIBLE**      ***38 And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. 39 No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.***

That brings us to the essence of *hesed*. *Hesed* is a selfless, committed love. It's not just a love of feelings. It can be an affection and can involve our feelings, but it goes much deeper. It is an action and the selflessness. It is looking to meet the needs of another, even though you have no obligation to do that. *Hesed* goes above and beyond the call of duty. It is an extraordinary love, that puts the needs

of others before ourselves. The Scriptures tell us that God is like this kind of love, even to the point of sacrificing something of God's self in order to give to his children.

We see this in remarkable dogs and I want to show you one of them that I learned about this week, whose name is Lilly.

### **GRAPHIC Lilly the Pit Bull**

Lilly was a pit-bull that was going to be destroyed. She was shy and sweet, but there was no one who was willing to take her. A police officer in Boston finally decided to adopt Lilly and take her home to his mother. His mother Shirley struggled with alcoholism and depression. He thought that Lilly might be the very thing to help his mom come out of her depression and maybe give her a reason to live and stop drinking.

That is exactly what happened! Surely took and Lilly and Lilly gave Shirley a reason to live. She stopped drinking and came out of her depression and found that this dog loved her and needed love from her. For three-years she remained sober and it was amazing the impact that Lilly had on Shirley. One night, Shirley took Lilly for a walk over to one of her friend's home who is having a tough time. For whatever reason, that friend had a bottle of booze and poured them both a drink. Shirley looked at the drink and could not decide what to do. She finally took a drink, and one drink led to another, which led to another, which led to another, until Shirley was intoxicated.

It was time for Shirley to go home and fortunately she had Lilly with her and Lilly was going to lead her home. Lilly knows where home is and she begins to lead Shirley while it was dark. They come to cross over some railroad tracks and Shirley lost her footing and her foot got stuck in the railroad tracks and she fell to the ground. Just about that time, lights began coming in the distance down the tracks. Lilly tried to pull her master from the train tracks. She grabs her clothing and licks her face and then even grabbed an arm to try to pull her to safety. She

can't get Shirley loose and because Shirley is intoxicated she cannot get herself loose. The train is barreling down the tracks and finally, Lilly goes and stands in front of her master and in front of the train, placing herself between the train and Shirley. Lilly went down the tracks and begins barking and standing in the middle of the tracks. The conductor sees the dog and pulls the brakes and the train comes screeching to a halt, but not before it hits Lilly took off her front paw and pushed the her up against Shirley. The train never touched Shirley.

Lilly, even having lost a paw and being battered and bruised, crawls and covers Shirley with her body protect her master. This is a remarkable true story which is been told across the country. Here is a picture of Lilly after the accident.

**GRAPHIC**            **Lilly and Shirley**

**GRAPHIC**            **Lilly the Hero**

She has become maybe the most famous pit-bull that has ever lived. Lilly has a Facebook page with more than a half million fans! Her impulse to lay down her life to save her master, goes against every evolutionary thing that we know. It goes against everything that is supposed to drive us as human beings and mammals who long to survive and self-preserve. Human beings, on occasion, will lay down their lives for others, but dogs routinely are willing to do this for their owners.

Dogs paint a picture for us of the love of God in their willingness to sacrifice. Jesus put it this way in John's Gospel.

**BIBLE**            ***12 This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. 13 There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.***

Josh Billings, a humorist, wrote this.

**SLIDE**            **"A dog is the only thing on earth that loves you more than he loves himself."**

I would suggest that there is one other being which loves you more than he loves himself, and that the dog is just a reflection of the other being. God loves you more than he loves himself and God came and walked among us, we Christians believe, in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus came to show us the way, the truth and the life and the depth of God's love for us. The Scriptures tell us that God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so we might experience life in his name. The apostle Paul says this about the love of God as he prays for the Ephesians. It's a prayer that I pray at the end of every funeral that I do.

**BIBLE**     *17 May Christ make his home in your hearts as you trust in him so your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. 18 And may you have the power to understand...how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. 19 May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.*

Paul says this in Romans 5:8.

**BIBLE**     *8 But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.*

We look at the cross, and we are meant to recognize that when Jesus is dying on the cross, this is the most clear and profound and dramatic way that God can say to us, "I love you so much that I would lay down my life for you." When we try to tell our kids how much we love them, the most profound thing we can say is that we love them so much that in a heartbeat, without having to even think about it, we would give our lives for them. That's how much God loves us.

Lilly the pit-bull was showing us a picture of what we find in the Gospel. We have three dogs, Joey, Jasper and Jack. When we get home, their bodies immediately begin contorting and twisting and Jasper does

his little circular happy dance. They just want to give us love and will catapult themselves on to us when we are on the couch. When we eat, they are at our feet, which may be because of the food. When we watch TV, they each get in one of our laps or as close as possible. It kind of grosses me out to sleep with dogs, but I know some of you like that. I have to keep the door closed or all three of them will jump on the bed and make their home as close as possible to our heads. Jack loves to go for the ears and he will begin licking and nibbling at your ears, which can be a bit gross if you know where his mouth has been! They are each bundles of unconditional love.

You may not remember the sermon six months or a year from now, but I hope you remember, when you look at a dog and see unconditional love, that might be a picture of the love of God for you. Maybe the dog is a sacrament, a means of grace, by which you see God's grace and mercy for you.

Several years ago, I played this video for you and many of you asked if we were going to see it again and I thought it would be a good time to remember the love of God and the love of a dog.

## **VIDEO                    God and Dog**

The banners we have for this series were painted for us by Cindy Atchison. They are not generic dogs but actually our dogs that came from family here in the church. The one behind me was the dog who moved here with us to Durango, Mikah. He was an Alaskan malamute and saluki mix that we got at the pound in Denver. This is one of our favorite pictures of him that you see painted and now up on the video screen.

## **GRAPHIC                    Mikah at gate**

Even though he was very large, he was an escape artist and could get out of anything. This is the hole he poked in the fence I built at our home in Denver so he could see out. I had to build the fence 6 feet tall but he still could jump it if he wanted to. I remember vividly the day our

family took him to the vet here in Durango when he could no longer stand and walk. He, and our golden retriever Gwen, were the first two dogs our kids met when we adopted them from Ukraine and so they went with us. We sat with him one last time as they gave him the shot and he slowly faded away.

I still get emotional thinking about it today as does my wife because the two of them were companions in a very deep sense. We both were in tears because he had been for us a constant friend, greeting us when we got home, howling whenever the snow would start to fall, wanting to be by our sides. He had been a source of comfort and consolation when we were sad or low. He displayed for us an image of the love of God.

I think that's why it hurts so much when we lose our animals. Because in some way, they are painting a picture for us of something so special and so remarkable. But, it's only a glimpse of something even greater that God longs to give to each one of us. Please try to remember, if you get nothing else out of today's sermon:

**God is always with you. God promises to never leave you nor forsake you. You don't have to be afraid.**

**God is your comforter and your strength, your ever-present help in time of need. You can talk to God and take your burdens to him and he will care for you.**

**Finally, God loves you more than you can imagine or believe and that has the power to change your life and sustain your life and give you life.**

With that in mind, I invite you to bow in prayer.

**SLIDE      Prayer**

As your heads are bowed and your eyes are closed, I would invite you to simply whisper this prayer to God on your breath.

*Thank you, God, for loving me... I trust that you exist... I trust in*

*your steadfast love... Draw me near to you... And help me oh God... that I might display your love... to all that I meet... Thank you, God, for loving me. In Jesus name. Amen.*