

All Dogs Go To Heaven
Revelation 21:1-6a
NUCC Traditional
4 November 2018 (All Saint's Sunday)

*PRAY

I decided that it was time to have something else that was living in my home other than a plant. I don't actually remember when the dream began to form in my subconscious, but for years I have wanted a chocolate Labrador retriever, and I have wanted to name him Max. The name comes from the Congressman that I worked for on Capitol Hill and I just like the name.

And so, this past February— I actually remember the day, it was Superbowl Sunday—I found a litter of puppies outside of Tampa that had been born the week before. They would become available the week before Palm Sunday. That meant that I would have a puppy in my home for Holy Week, leading up to Easter. I emailed the breeder and said: “Is there any chance that you could keep the puppy an extra week? I'd like to pick him up the day after Easter.”

He agreed, and so the morning after Easter I picked up two dear friends and we set off to Plant City, Florida! We got home around 4 that afternoon and I remember thinking: “Okay, now what do I do?”

I grew up with dogs, but have never owned one by myself. The staff and leadership were great as I figured out a new routine and a new life. Max spends most weekdays at puppy daycare so that he can get some of his Labrador energy out. But I do enjoy taking him on walks in my neighborhood and the occasional trip to the dog park.

Dr. Stanley Coren, a psychologist and an expert on dog intelligence, says the average trained dog knows about 165 words and that most dogs can count to 4 or 5. Max has had training, and I'm not sure that he will know 165 words, but it does amaze me how much he seems to understand. He certainly seems to understand breakfast, dinner and treat. He also seems fascinated with going to the garage, but, since that is where his food is stored, that makes total sense.

But what I began to notice, early in his now nine-month-old life, was that no matter where we were walking in my neighborhood, be it on my street or in another section, if I say: "Max do you want to go home?" he will intuitively turn the direction that is needed to guide us that way. It is the most amazing thing. It can be light or dark, early or late, close or far, it doesn't matter, Max's heart and mind instinctively know how to get home.

And I believe that is what happens to us when we reach the end of our lives. I believe our bodies whisper "home" and our souls instinctively turn toward Heaven and toward God. It would be magical, if it were not so deeply spiritual. You see, the God who created each of us is the same God who calls us back to God's self when we depart this earthly coil.

And yes, those of us who are left to grieve and pick up the pieces after a death are the ones left to cry and ask questions like "Why?" and God understands that. But more deeply, we are the ones who can witness to their faithful lives. We are the ones who can say: "I was there when they whispered 'home', and I watched God welcome them with open arms." I am not sure there is any more precious yet painful gift than to

walk the journey with someone through the veil between this life and the next. I have walked it countless times and it is one of the reasons I love being a pastor.

The apostle John wrote in Revelation: "...Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more..." (vs. 4.) John could envision a "new heaven and a new earth" where we will no longer be separated from those that we love. But as we all know, we do not live in that "new heaven and new earth" yet. So, let us live into what Mitch Albom wrote when he said: "Love is how you stay alive, even after you are gone."

Let us live in that love while we still have breath, and let us hold each other in that love when we are separated by death. You see, the power of our faith, the foundation of the Christian story, is that nothing, not even death, can separate us from God, and ultimately nothing can separate us from each other. Not even death.