



Growing up on a farm, we had our share of representation from Kingdom Animalia: some cows and pigs here and there, even a goat and a rooster thrown in there at times for good measure. But there would always be a dog, and regardless of the breed, he or she would always be too spoiled for their own good, having seemingly the entire countryside as a backyard to roam, not to mention far too much access to the human food inside the house, where they could also jump onto couches and beds, as if they

were on the same level of importance as the two-legged creatures in their midst.

There were a couple canines before in my earlier growing-up years, but the one that I remember most from that time was Gus. But Gus was an English Springer Spaniel, and so he was genetically hard-wired to be rather territorial, as his European ancestors were trained to hunt for birds among other things. All well and good, but Gus would soon figure out what he needed to protect at all costs: the one who would spoil him the most, and give him his food, including the people-kind, and random treats, not to mention the comfy spot by the bed at night. It would be mom and the area surrounding her that would be the territory he needed to guard and remain true to his English Springer Spaniel roots.

Again, all well and good, but if the rest of us got a little too close to his pride and joy, he would unleash this deepest growl that seemed to reverberate the very foundations of the earth itself. And what made it worse for the adolescent me, as I tried to remain true to my age, and ever so slightly bend the rules, whenever I would make my way up the stairs to my room perhaps a little later than socially acceptable, and if I didn't hit all the silent spots on those steps, or on the floor just outside my parents' room, Gus would most assuredly blow my cover.

However, in spite of all of that, Gus, as with many pets on farms and in houses and apartments and everywhere else, still provided his fair share of a holy reminder of how God acts around us. The God who is rather protective of us, to say the least. The God who witnessed for ages as sin and death did their collective best to overstep into defining who we were as human beings for all times and places, and God insisted in Jesus Christ to respond with the most love-overflowing and grace-filled act in the cross and stone-shattered tomb to reverberate the very foundation of life itself. That nothing would stand a chance in our new human territory marked by hope and everlasting life.

Now as much as Gus did his fair share of protecting the territory around the one who typically gave him his food and most attention, he still did his fair share of embodying the Gospel text for the rest of us in the family, too. He did his fair share of resting beside us, and providing needed gentleness, and, in the end, giving us a little extra something that couldn't be explained to help us carry whatever heavy burdens were going on in life. It's as if those pets are somehow hard-wired by God to not only nourish their two-legged prides and joys, but that we remember our call from the Divine to tend to them and the Creation, for it is in the beauty of the entire earth that we also experience a call to rest and the needed gentleness, and a little extra something that we can't quite explain to help us carry whatever heavy burdens we have going on in our life.

Of course, on this day when we are reminded of blessings that we oftentimes take for granted, we gather, yet again, because of the ultimate blessing we share in Jesus Christ: the one who does not wait around for us to come to a certain spiritual territory of sorts before he decides to extend the rest for our weary hearts or the gentleness to our souls or empowering us to take on the heaviest of burdens on this journey. This is the Lord who will not wait around for us to come to him, but insisted on rushing to us from the beginning; the one who would not allow for sin and death to take eternal hold on us, but would take on that cross and the tomb and rush straight into our hearts to never ever go.

Yes, sometimes we need the four-legged creatures of all things to remind us of the one of constant companionship, the one with boundless love, the one with grace that we still cannot quite explain. But, thankfully, we don't have to: God will just go ahead and sacredly nudge up against us from the very beginning, and no matter how weary our hearts, no matter how heavy the burdens, no matter how much we cannot understand so much about this earthly journey, this God will never allow us to do so alone. So, for that Greatest News for all of us, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen.