

Module 8: Scripture Passages and Poems

*Your unfailing love, O LORD, is as vast as the heavens;
your faithfulness reaches beyond the clouds. Your
righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your justice
like the ocean depths. You care for people and animals
alike, O LORD. How precious is your unfailing love, O
God! All humanity finds shelter in the shadow of your
wings.*

Psalm 36:5-7

*Are they ever neither animal nor human
but creature and Being?
Do they have holy moments of understanding
deep in the seat of their entity?
Do they experience their existence more fully
relieved of the burden of wakefulness?
Do they suspect, with poets, that all we see or seem
is but a dream within a dream?*

**What do Animals Dream?
Yahia Lababidi**

When selecting the appropriate reading or poem, the family should be consulted. In the event they defer, either feeling insecure about their biblical culture, or preferring to leave the choice up to the Chaplain, it is important to interview the individuals involved in order to provide suitable options based on their religious beliefs, traditions, cultures and customs, and the nature of the situation. They may in effect opt for poetry passages.

Old Testament passages are sometimes a bit more challenging to understand and interpret than New Testament readings, but with practice and the approach I will discuss, they will be less complicated than initially thought, and surprisingly inspiring.

Prior to your reflection, choosing a reading from scripture or perhaps a poem depending on the type of service and the individuals participating, may serve to alert people to God's presence and promote a more intimate spiritual bond with the Divine Creator or a unity with nature. Once again, this is subjective and dependent on the commemoration and the family present. However, be prepared to accommodate requests for a spiritual service without any ties to a formalized religion.

For a funeral service, I always suggest words to encourage hope and to call upon God's love and comfort. When performing a Blessing or Welcoming ceremony, it is best to maintain the up-lifting mood with passages on renewal and the right of every animal to have love and respect.

Our goal for this module is to interpret and inspire. I have always loved this two-step approach and the positive impact it has on family members.

First, we interpret:

¹⁴Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds,¹⁵I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life.¹⁶Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth."

Genesis 9:14-16

Genesis is the first Book of the Old Testament and speaks about the creation of the world and all life—human, animal and plant. It also traces the early history of the world, including the narrative of the fall from grace and the adversities and hardships resulting from the sin of Adam. In the passage cited above God is referring to the flood sent in retribution for the wickedness of man (Noah's Ark) and His covenant (agreement) with animals and humans.

One important point to consider is that at a memorial service it is not necessary to read and interpret the entire passage in your reflection. It is more meaningful to reference a phrase or select a few words you feel are pertinent to the situation and build your reflection on that theme. Keep the terminology and interpretation simple and to the point. Attention spans wander during emotional events.

Case in question

The family's dog Spot passed away following a lengthy illness. Rescued from a shelter, after a period of five years, the elderly dog spent four years with his loving family.

To honor Spot, the scriptural passage could be interpreted to fit his life circumstances.

Spot went through terrible storms in his early years facing serious threats of losing his life to the uncontrollable currents. However, his family appeared with a special *Arc* to rescue him. The raging waters were unable to drown him because of the covenant of love that united God and the people he shared his life with and all those with whom he came into contact during his time in the family. His four years with his beloved humans were filled with love and nurturing, respect and dignity as God intended for His creatures.

Personally, I shun phrases like *God's Will* or *God wanted him back in heaven*, or any similar colloquial reference expressing that concept. There may be exceptions if the family makes a reference like this but in most cases, it is important to acknowledge the very real feelings of loss and grief while celebrating Spot's life.

Another example from the New Testament.

Mark 16:15

¹⁵ He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.

Mark 16:15

Mark is one of the four evangelists, along with Matthew, Luke, and John responsible for transcribing the words and parables of Jesus. Mark, Matthew and Luke's recordings are defined synoptic Gospels because of the sequential and content similarities written with remarkably like-minded perspectives and points of view.

In this passage, at the conclusion of Mark's Gospel, Jesus is instructing His disciples to preach the Gospel to all creation, and to emphasize love and compassion for all.

In this scenario, a family requests a funeral service for their cat Sadie. After a battle with cancer, she suffered defeat in her quest for survival. During her illness, she grew more attached to her family and demonstrated a more affectionate nature, than she exhibited in the early years of her life.

One possible interpretation can proceed like this:

If you Google images of Jesus, you will notice many remarkable and strikingly different situations. Much as the Son of God was faced with challenges during his earthly life, the difficulties never hindered Him from reaching out with the love and compassion that defines His life and teachings in the Gospels. I am certain you can visualize a similarity between Sadie turning her sick period into a time for more love and devotion to the people with whom she shared her life, and Christ focusing on healing and administering to others in spite of His agonizing destiny to redeem mankind.

Evangelization needs to be more widespread in today's world and Christ's messages of love and compassion for all living beings should be practiced

not merely read. What a beautiful example Sadie has given her family and powerfully she has inspired all gathered here today.

Both services honoring Spot and Sadie inspired and comforted family and friends present with scriptural readings and pertinent interpretations based on the beauty of their lives.

This same principle applies in the event of poetry readings. The most important point is to establish the connection the family wishes, be it religious or spiritual or one of unity and camaraderie between human and animal during their life together.

A family may provide you with a scripture passage. Read it over several times and try to find a link between the message and words and the special relationship of the animal with family members and friends. If they do not have a passage in mind, be prepared to share appropriate selections.

One online tool that I find most helpful is www.biblegateway.com On this site you can research specific passages or if need be, insert keywords which will bring forth a plethora of passages related to the words/themes you entered. I want to emphasize that in many situations finding the right, empowering, inspiring, comforting reading may be the most significant part of the service. Personally, I have officiated at numerous funerals, memorials, and celebrations both for humans and animals and can state with the certainty of first-hand experience that the participants focus is at its sharpest level at the completion of the scripture as you segue into the reflection. In this moment, you either capture and hold attention or foster distracted thinking which is definitely not the goal of any presider.

That being said, I will be willing to work with you for as long as you need in this area. Please feel free to contact me at any time as an Animal Chaplain, to discuss possibilities for sermons to best serve in your ministry.

Module 8: Assignments

Assignment Number 1

Spend at least thirty minutes surfing through www.biblegateway.com to familiarize yourself with all the offerings.

I strongly encourage you to “practice” scripture/poem interpretation and keep a log of possible stories and observations. Consider at least twice a week on this important and enjoyable exercise.

Please also review the video included with this module.

Always feel free to contact me with any questions or if you desire feedback

Assignment Number 2

A family asks you to officiate at a memorial service for their dog, Dortmund. At age fifteen, Dortmund passed away after a brief illness. The family confided a favorite memory and mentioned he will always be remembered for his endearing puppy antics even in adulthood until his last breath. He inspired everyone he met, especially older friends and family members, demonstrating there is something beautiful and special about acting young. Yes – Dortmund understood the secret of eternal youth: Never act your age!

The family’s request was to have the Animal Chaplain select a Christian reading to honor Dortmund.

After consideration and consultation, you select the following passage from the Gospel of Luke:

*[The Little **Children** and Jesus] People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the **children** to him and said, "Let the little **children** come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."*

Luke 18:15-17

Write a reflection for Dortmund's memorial service and e-mail me a copy. You may choose to record it to best practice proclaiming it. Choose the option that you find preferable.

Once I receive and review your reflection, we will schedule a phone conversation to discuss.

Congratulations!
You have successfully completed
Module 8.

Please take some time to celebrate this accomplishment and refresh yourself before moving on to Module 9.