

Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

November 3, 2024

In 1181, a baby was born in Assisi, a little town in Italy. That's 844 years ago. The baby's mother baptized him with the name Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone. Giovanni's father added the name Francesco (Francis) to his son's first name, likely to honor the father's love of France. Years later Francis Giovanni became known as St. Francis of Assisi.

When Giovanni, or St. Francis, was young, his parents were very wealthy. His mother was a noblewoman from Provence, France and his father was a wealthy silk maker.

Francis loved religion, God, nature, and animals all his life. He was not interested in the fancy fabrics or the life that his father led. As Francis grew older, he ended up following his own interests and beliefs. He built his life around helping other people and lived his life very much like a teacher he admired, named Jesus. (Jesus had died more than 1,000 years before Francis was born.)

Francis Giovanni became St. Francis two years after he died, when Pope Gregory IX named him a saint.

St. Francis inspired other people to want to live as he did, which continues to this day. You may see statues or bird baths with St. Francis next to them, because he loved nature.

St. Francis spoke with animals, who listened to him sing and tell stories or preach. People were amazed and wondered why the animals stopped what they were doing to pay attention to this man. He once even tamed a wolf that the townspeople feared.

St. Francis was able to commune or connect with animals because he considered them his kin, or his siblings and other relatives. He said that animals and people are related to each other and have more in common than they have differences.

Well, it turns out he was right.

We come from the same stardust as every other natural thing on Earth. This means that we are

comprised of the same stardust as rocks, plants, rivers, water, birds, fish, trees, crystals, flowers, insects, and animals.

There is perhaps no greater truth than the truth that we are part of the natural world. We are not separate. We are kin, meaning we are related to all animals, other people, plants, insects, and water. It's amazing how many ways insects, spiders, birds, and humans are alike.

Author and dog rescuer Kate Forster writes:

I think it's a deep consolation to know that spiders dream, that monkeys tease predators, that dolphins have accents, that lions can be scared silly by a lone mongoose, that otters hold hands, and ants bury their dead...there isn't (other animals) life and (human) life...it's just one teetering and endless thread and all of us, all of us, are entangled with it as deep as entanglement goes."¹

St. Francis knew we were related to animals and all of life, but he didn't learn this in school. He knew this truth of interconnectedness between all sentient beings in his heart—he felt it, he saw it with his eyes, and he heard it with his ears. He didn't refer to other parts of nature as "it." He called the sun *brother sun*, and the moon *sister moon*. He had similar personal names for the wind, fire, and water.

St. Francis wrote about his deep love for all of nature in his poem "The Cantic of the Creatures." He writes that God is praised through the sun, moon, star, and winds, not *for* them or because he created them. In other words, creation is the expression or incarnation of what he called God.

Let me share some of St. Francis' poem, "The Cantic of the Creatures." I changed the word God or Lord to other words we use to describe the same experience, such as Great Mystery, Love, and Spirit of Life.

*Praised be you, oh Mystery
with all your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,*

I

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*who is the day through whom
you bring us light.*

*Praised be you, dear Life,
through Sister Moon and Stars.
In heaven you have formed them,
lightsome and precious and fair.*

*And praised be you, Great Spirit,
through Brother Wind, through
air and cloud, through calm
and every weather by which
you sustain your creatures.*

*Praised be you, Spirit of Love,
through Sister Water,
so very useful and humble,
precious and chaste.*

*Praised be you, oh, God,
through Brother Fire,
by whom you light up
the night, and he is
handsome and merry,
robust and strong.*

*Praised be you, the peace that passeth all
understanding
through our Sister, Mother Earth,
who sustains us and directs us
bringing forth all kinds of fruits
and colored flowers and herbs.*

*Praised be you, Indescribable Awe,
through our Sister Bodily Death
from whom no living being
can escape.*

St. Francis was a wonderful and very wise person. He also created the first creche, or nativity, where live animals would come to play the scene of Jesus' birth, just like we do with our Christmas pageant, though you all dress up like the animals.

One of my favorite things St. Francis used to say was: *Preach the gospel, use words when necessary.* That means that how we live says more about what we believe than what we say we believe.

There is another prayer called the Prayer of St. Francis that is all about peace and how we can live our lives to create more peace. I think it's very meaningful, especially today.

So, I'll read this prayer and then we will begin the animal blessing. (Again I have changed the words for Lord.)

Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi (Prayer for Peace)

*Life, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.*

*O source of Love, grant that I may not so much
seek*

*to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.*

*For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is remembering our union with all of
creation that we are born to eternal life.*