

Francis of Assisi, Renewer of the Church

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

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Psalm 148

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Today is the commemoration of Francis of Assisi. Our calendar commemorates all kinds of people. Our calendar is designed to affirm all kinds of vocations, callings. So we recognize nurses and musicians. Poets and scientists. Francis is on our calendar as a “renewer of the church.” He is one of 22 individuals so designated by our calendar. Other individuals include Birgitta of Sweden and Julian of Norwich, the desert fathers Antony and Pachomius, Bede and Columba of the British Isles, John Wesley, John Calvin, and Martin Luther. There are many, many labels for a person like Martin Luther. There are many, many labels for a person like Francis. Our calendar labels both of them “renewers of the church.” People who brought new life to the church.

There’s a whole *different* label and category called “renewers of *society*.” a category which includes Martin Luther King, Jr. [But] Francis of Assisi and Martin Luther renewed the church. They affected the lives of believers. And the ways in which the church shapes believers and believers shape the church.

When Argentine Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was chosen to be pope in 2013, he was the first pope ever to choose the name Francis. He surely chose that name because, although Francis of Assisi was many things, Francis was a renewer of the church. I think that *Pope* Francis, like Saint Francis, has sought to imitate Jesus. And there is something extraordinarily compelling about that. Many, many stories and sermons could be shared.

Francis of Assisi was a renewer of the church. But he also had a way of looking at creation, at nature. Francis envisioned the universe as having two categories. The Creator. And the creatures. And the creatures are all peers, according to Francis. In the most famous words of Francis, the sun is humanity’s brother. And the moon is humanity’s sister. It’s an extraordinary revision of the old Christian and Jewish notion that the sun and the moon are rival gods. That the sun and the moon must be denigrated because they had been worshiped by pagans for hundreds of years. In the English language, which is partly Germanic, Sunday is named for the sun. And Monday is named for the moon. The gods. Christians have played word games with Sunday, trying to pretend that the sun in Sunday is the Son of God. That’s clever, but it’s not the real reason we call it Sunday. Sunday and Monday are named in honor of the pagan gods. Rivals of the one true God. Francis demotes them to our siblings. Brother sun. Sister moon. Gender inclusivity, 13th century style. In Francis’ poetry, they are not gods, but peers. Siblings.

Companions. Fellow sentient beings giving praise to our Creator.

In this way, Francis is following the psalms in giving a voice to the creation. Primarily a voice of praise. You will hear that in the Christmas carol, “Joy to the World.” *Let heaven and nature sing. Let heaven and nature sing. While fields & floods, rocks, hills & plains Repeat the sounding joy.* The poet Isaac Watts turned to psalms 96 and 98, which talk about the forests and trees singing, the floods clapping their hands, and the hills singing together. On the best mornings, I can be outside listening to the birds singing. For no apparent reason other than the fact that they enjoy it. And it’s easy for anyone with a heart to imagine that they are singing their praises to God. That’s not a huge leap. But to imagine things that I think of as inanimate—trees, rocks, waters, geology— to imagine those things singing their praises to God requires great imagination and spirit. That’s what our psalm this morning, number 148, also does. It even allows sea monsters to praise God.

But that’s what the Old Testament does. In the New Testament, in Revelation, John of Patmos writes: *I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, ‘To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might for ever and ever!’* [Revelation 5:13] Revelation is taking the style and character of the psalms and making Jesus Christ the goal of song. In one of our Lutheran canticles, we paraphrase Revelation, saying, *Sing with all the people of God, and join in the hymn of all creation.*

So the Bible gives a voice to the creation. A voice which mostly praises God. However, there are times when the voice of creation is raised against humankind. In the story of the brothers Cain and Abel, Cain grows crops, and Abel tends sheep. A farmer and a rancher. Cain kills Abel in his field where he grows crops. And according to Genesis, the earth—the ground—cries out in protest to God. The soil raises the alarm against the evil deeds of a man. And the ground basically goes on strike, saying that whatever Cain tries to cultivate in the future, the ground will not cooperate. A farmer needs soil, and the soil basically says, “I won’t work with Cain anymore.” Creation testifies against humankind.

What is the story of Noah other than God becoming angry with the human race, but taking care to preserve the animals? They haven’t done anything wrong. But humankind has. The animals are a contrast to the human species.

The Bible shows that in some interesting ways. Donkeys get special treatment in the Bible. Because they are not known for their intelligence or their wisdom. And yet, they are used as a contrast to human beings. Who frequently show less intelligence and wisdom than donkeys. One of the most underrated stories in the Bible is Balaam and his donkey. Also known as “Balaam’s ass.” Balaam is on a trip to go and curse the people of Israel, and the donkey sees God’s angel standing in the middle of the road. And the donkey refuses to go forward. So Balaam beats the donkey. It’s the story of human will going against God’s will. And the donkey sees the peril and foolishness in that. But the man does not.

And then, my favorite donkey is in Isaiah. Where most of the best things come from. Isaiah begins with God lamenting how his people have turned away from him. *The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.* [Isaiah 1:3] The animals– the ox and the ass– have sense that humankind does not. A dog knows who places food in its bowl. But humans do not acknowledge the one who puts food on their tables. *The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib.* Therefore, these two critters show up in Nativity scenes at the crib of Jesus. *Ox and ass before him bow, and he is in the manger now.* So Isaiah is using the ox and the ass to illustrate how we human beings fail to recognize our true Master, and in the art and poetry of Christmas, the ox and the ass show that in the coming of Jesus into the world, we will be drawn back to our true Master.

And guess who invented the nativity scene? Francis of Assisi. And guess what two animals Francis had in the first nativity scene? (It was a live nativity scene, by the way.) Not sheep. Not camels. One ox. One donkey. We have this information on the authority of Saint Bonaventure, one of the first Franciscans, and so this can be considered fairly reliable historical fact.

So, Francis was a renewer of the church. Finding better ways to connect the hearts of the people with the message and mission of the Church. But he was also insightful about the Bible, and his love of creation helped him to read the Bible in a fresh way. Today I've pointed out that Francis, like the Bible, gave a voice to the creation. That voice of creation gives praise to God. But occasionally challenges the arrogance and wickedness of humankind. How is the voice of creation speaking today? I don't think it takes a particularly great imagination and spirit to discern what the voice of creation is saying.

If Saint Francis were to visit the great American city that is named for him, San Francisco, California, and if he saw blood orange skies and choking smoke and cinders forcing people to stay indoors, how would Francis interpret the voice of creation? And if Francis spoke, would the Church listen? Would the world listen? Amen.