

The Feast of St. Francis  
October 6, 2024  
Job 39: 1-18, Psalm 121, /Acts 4:32-5:1-11  
Luke 12:13-21

## St. Francis, Troubadour of the Gospel.

Good morning, everyone, and welcome to our celebration of the feast of St. Francis of Assisi! St. Francis is probably one of most admired saints in the Christian calendar, and his life and work continue to influence people both inside and outside the Church. His love of the natural world, his call to live peaceably in love and charity with our neighbors, and to practice simplicity of habit and heart have appealed to folks of all backgrounds. Our very own San Francisco is named after him, we find his statue adorning gardens, birdbaths, and his likeness on murals, and church banners. If you attend just about any denomination of church at this time of year you will find cats meowing, birds chirping, dogs barking and cavorting, and even the occasional reptile or spider awaiting a blessing. (I'll keep my distance if I bless the latter, thank you!) Our very own Grace Cathedral even had a donkey in attendance on several occasions! And yet, there is so much more to the life of St. Francis than these wonderful stories of his love of creation, though they

are certainly important. At a time in the Church's history when it was being dragged down by complacency, and embracing worldly ways of power and corruption, St. Francis restored the freshness, the joy, the urgency of following Christ. He held up the life of Jesus, with all its redeeming power, lived out the implications of that life, and left an example for us to follow.

Francis of Assisi was born in Italy around 1181, the son of Pietro Bernardone, who was a prosperous silk merchant. Francis lived the life of a wealthy young man, with plenty of money to spend on fine food and wine with his friends, with whom he was fond of going around the city, troubadour-style, singing of the virtues of chivalry and courtly love. He enjoyed this life, and had a generous, fun-loving nature. After a time, however, he came restless and disillusioned with this life of privilege and ease and signed up for two rounds of service in the military. This deepened his disillusionment with the world, and he prayed fervently to God asking for direction on how his life was to unfold. He later reported that he had a vision of the Lord Jesus Christ in an old, abandoned chapel, San Damiano, outside of Assisi. In it, Jesus told him "Francis,

rebuild my church! Francis took this literally, and began to single-handedly restore the church. He renounced his former lavish lifestyle and spurned his father's inheritance. His father beat and reviled him for this. His break with his father was dramatic, and legend has it that Francis stripped himself naked in the town square as a sign of his renunciation of his old life, and that the bishop shielded him with his cloak. After this, he lived the life of a penitent, and wandered the countryside, preaching about the life of humility, repentance, love, and reconciliation to all who would listen.

Soon he began to gather other disciples, who became his brothers. Within a year or so, he had 12 followers, who lived a simple life in a deserted leper colony near Assisi. They were wandering preachers, traveling through the mountains of Umbria and calling people to follow Christ wholeheartedly, and live in love and charity with their neighbors. In around 1209, he composed a simple rule for his followers, which was summed up in "following the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and walking in his footsteps." He then sought an audience with Pope Innocent III, asking that his group to be admitted as a religious order in

the Church. At first the Pope and some of his councilors objected, believing that the itinerant way of life, wandering the countryside, preaching, and relying on begging and alms for survival was unsafe. And then, Pope Innocent had a dream in which he saw Francis upholding the Lateran Basilica, and he believed that God had called Francis to this work, and he approved the order. So, in 1210, the Franciscan Order was founded. Later on in that year, Francis encouraged Clare of Assisi, a wealthy young noblewoman who felt called to a life of devotion to Christ, simplicity and service, to lead a community of women in the Franciscan way. He also founded the Third Order, a group of men and women, laity and clergy, who were not called to give up all to live in community, but still wanted to follow the way and Rule of St. Francis. These orders still exist to this day. I have been a member of the Episcopal Third Order since 1987, and it has supported and encouraged me in times of uncertainty, suffering, change, and turmoil, as well as times of joy, and peace, and abundance.

As time went on, and the members in the Order increased, Francis and other leaders sometimes found it difficult to accommodate the

growing numbers and influence of the group, while still holding firm to the ideals of the Rule, humility, simplicity and service. It saddened Francis to see his order become more of an institution, rather than a movement. It was something that troubled him more as he neared the end of his life. Like other religious of that time period, he sometimes didn't treat his body too well, and by his late thirties, his health began to break down. He suffered from very painful eye ailments, and later from a serious form of malaria. He died at age 45 on October 4, 1226. It is said that before his death, he asked his brothers to bring him outside, and lay his body on the bare earth, which had nurtured him and gave him so much joy.

Francis' joy, his compassion, and his connection to creation continue to influence the human family today. His devotion to the Passion of Christ, his willingness to offer himself as a channel of peace, of building bridges, and his example of living simply as a testament of God's abundance have inspired all people of faith to grow spiritually and to give themselves in service.

Francis identified strongly with the crucified Christ, and in his suffering, death, and resurrection, felt the assurance of God's overflowing love for him and all people. For him, the idea of atonement was not of Jesus needing to die to appease God's wrath due to our sin, but the ultimate act of love of the God who longed to heal us, restore us, and draw us to himself. It was the sign of God's knitting himself to us forever. It is said that Francis was so caught up in his adoration of the Crucified One that he received the Stigmata, or marks of the wounds of Christ in his hands, feet, and sides. He tried to hide them so not to draw attention to himself. Francis' example helps us to enter more deeply into the mystery of love that is at the heart of Jesus' death on the cross.

Then, in Francis' time, just as we see now, violence, mistrust, and war wracked the earth. The Crusades were a time of particularly heinous brutality, where "soldiers of the Church" were encouraged to kill their fellow human beings in the name of Jesus and the preservation of holy lands. Francis observed this happening, and at great risk to himself and his party, crossed enemy lines with the desire to share his Christian faith with the Sultan, Malek el-Kamil, and other Muslims. He

was given safe passage and began to share his faith respectfully. The Sultan responded in kind. It was reported that both men realized they weren't going to convert the other, that they each knew God, and they kept conversing and being in dialogue about the treasures of their faith, listening with great interest and respect. On Francis' departure, al-Kamil gave him an ivory trumpet as a gift, and he said he had the utmost respect for Francis. Francis also respected the Sultan and his faith. And he left an example for us today, of how to deeply listen to those who are different from us, to be present, to honor their humanity, instead of judging and separating people into camps of us and them.

And finally, St. Francis gave us the example of valuing simplicity and understanding our lives as gifts of God to be received in gratitude. Now most of us are not going to be called to sell our homes and all of our possessions, and live on the streets begging for our living, with only the clothing on our backs. But we are all called to live simply so that others can simply live, and not keep wanting more and more, an attitude that also stifles and deadens our own souls. We are all called to be detached from our possessions, enjoying and appreciating what we have

been given, yet ready to let go, and be willing to share our bounty, and see it as a gift rather than as our due. And living simply is more than being mindful of our attachment to material things. It is seeking to live more and more from the center where God dwells, and making decisions about how we will live, how we will spend our time, and what our priorities are. Our lives can become cluttered with over-commitment (I know about that one), too many priorities, the stress of the drive to achievement. Living simply means to let go, find where God is inviting us, in joy and hope, to work and serve and love, seeking where our passion and the needs of the world meet.

As we finish our Francis stories, I would like to leave you with a few verses of the Canticum of the Creatures, a poem he wrote at the end of his life. It captures his spirit and his faith. For you see, he remained a troubadour of joy throughout his life!

“Most High, all-powerful, all-good Lord! All praise is yours, all glory, honor, and blessing. To you alone, Most High, do they belong. No mortal lips are worthy to pronounce your name. Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures, especially through my lord Brother Sun, who



brings the day, and you bring light through him. Be praised my lord, through Sister Moon, and the stars, in the heavens. You have made them bright, precious, and beautiful. Be praised, my lord through our sister Mother earth, who feeds us and rules us, and produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs. Praise and bless my Lord, and give thanks, and serve him with great humility.” Amen.