

**St Francis- look again
(Job 38:1-12 the message bible)**

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And now, finally, God answered Job from the eye of a violent storm. He said:

“Why do you confuse the issue?
Why do you talk without knowing what you’re talking about?
Pull yourself together, Job!
Up on your feet! Stand tall!
I have some questions for you,
and I want some straight answers.
Where were you when I created the earth?
Tell me, since you know so much!
Who decided on its size? Certainly you’ll know that!
Who came up with the blueprints and measurements?
How was its foundation poured,
and who set the cornerstone,
While the morning stars sang in chorus
and all the angels shouted praise?
And who took charge of the ocean
when it gushed forth like a baby from the womb?
That was me! I wrapped it in soft clouds,
and tucked it in safely at night.
Then I made a playpen for it,
a strong playpen so it couldn’t run loose,
And said, ‘Stay here, this is your place.
Your wild tantrums are confined to this place.’
“And have you ever ordered Morning, ‘Get up!’
told Dawn, ‘Get to work!’

.....

Leonardo da Vinci had a fascinating way of training young artists. He would ask them to paint a fish from the pond. When they returned with their drawings he would glance at them and then suggest that they go and “look again”. When they returned they were met with the same suggestion, “go look again”. For Leonardo there was always more to see.

Who can contend with this God of Job? Who can answer this Creator's questions? 'Look again' this God also invites. I love the tenderness of the image of care for the ocean, with the morning stars singing in chorus and all the angels shouting praise. This story from the book of Job speaks of an intimacy with creation, a kinship and maternal boundary setting. Today we remember St Francis of Assisi, thirteenth century saint who gets this God and his own closeness to creation.

Jan Richardson reflects:

We know St. Francis in large part for The Canticle of the Creatures, which he began during a time of intense illness. Of his desire to write the canticle, he said to his brothers,

"I wish to compose a new hymn about the Lord's creatures, of which we make daily use, without which we cannot live, and with which the human race greatly offends its Creator."

He writes of Brother Sun, Sister Moon and the stars, Brother Wind, Sister Water, Brother Fire. He counted mortality among God's familiar and familial creatures; on his deathbed, Francis added verses to his Canticle of Creation that included the line, "Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whom no one living can escape."¹

Francis also left behind a handful of writings that testify to his deep and simple love of God.

In his Earlier Rule that Francis wrote for his community, he pleaded,

Therefore,
let us desire nothing else,
let us want nothing else,
let nothing else please us and cause us delight
except our Creator, Redeemer and Saviour,
the only true God,
Who is the fullness of good....
Therefore,
let nothing hinder us,
nothing separate us,
nothing come between us.²

This crazy radical Francis is enticing.

I first visited St Francis's Assisi in 1989, just before I was ordained deacon in the Anglican Church. And I have been back several times since. There is something about the place and its connection to Francis.

It was in July 2011, twenty two years later, that I was on an interfaith retreat just outside Assisi. I love Assisi with its Basilica of Saint Francis, and its Santa Chiara Church where Saint Francis and Saint Clare's bodies respectively are embalmed and on display, a bit foreign to my experience. I love the cobbled streets and the sense of eternity.

¹ (Quotations from Francis of Assisi: The Saint, ed. by Regis Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., et al.)
<http://paintedprayerbook.com/2008/10/04/feast-of-st-francis/> accessed 20 September 2023

² *ibid.*,

At the time, I wrote, of my visit to St Clare's Church, "St Chiara, I gaze on your mortal body. Reverence, a bit strange. Why are you here when your work is done? A reminder to me 800 years later of your adolescent rebellion from family to follow God and this way of Saint Francis, always your friend. A leader of women, you wrote the first set of monastic guidelines known to have been written by a woman, passionate still."

Back on retreat, in the mountains outside the town, where St Francis often retreated, I sit and meditate, back against the wall, listening to the bells of Assisi, opening to God, twice a day, morning and evening in silent meditation with others, with a movement meditation in the middle of the day, being.

I found it quite confronting on retreat, surprisingly, to have images of Saint Francis alongside Buddha and Ganesh. It was a synchronistic worldview, but for me it was a silent time of prayer. I read of Saint Francis and Saint Claire and drew close to them and to God. Yet Francis broke new ground. He spoke with Moslem leaders. He was active as well as contemplative, working for peace.

I heard of Lady Poverty, and of Francis' humanity, going crook on his brothers after he came back to them after retreating. My humanity too is often manifest when I return home from retreat! John Main says meditation is the way of poverty.

I heard of God's call to Francis to "rebuild my church", and him stripping naked and leaving everything behind.

What do I learn from this thirteenth century man? Why do we remember him today? Maybe it is the simplicity, the poverty, the peacemaking, maybe it is his sensibility and relationship to all of creation, a call of our time too?

I'm not sure, but I am drawn to Francis and Clare and their teaching.

Listening today, again, I consider the lilies, the birds of the air, this spring time. I notice the abundant blossoms on the fruit trees, the colourful tulips and ranunculus in our garden, thank you Nikolai. This week we saw tiny ducklings chirping on the grass in the Botanic Gardens with not a parent in sight. We tried to steer them to water where they might be safer, and fearing for their welfare, Nikolai alerted staff. We heard later that the staff found the parent ducks had finally returned after being scared off by too many visitors.

The pandemic and its aftermath has reintroduced Lady Poverty. Spaciousness and reality. Yet, we build the church like St Francis, out there at home in cyberspace. Benedictus grows and evolves. Connections are made, even in daily silence.

What does this mean for us? Faithfulness, simplicity, poverty, kinship with creation? For me, spiritual direction, and interplay, quiet days, and community, retreats, stewardship of creation, prayer.

God says to Job, look at creation, can you explain it? I was there at the beginning and I'm still here. Look again.

And Jesus says to us, and to his community suffering under Roman law:

“Do not worry about your life. Do not worry about your body. Can any of you, for all your worrying add a single hour to your life?” Look at the birds! Look at the flowers! Stop worrying!

Look around³. 'Look again'.

“Don’t worry”, he says. “Don’t worry, look at the rest of creation. Don't worry,” he says. How can we not worry, with el ninio coming, natural disaster on disaster, flood, earthquake, fire, drought, people dying, and worrying politics around the world. How can we not worry?

Look to the earth, the book of nature teaches us of God. It just is.

I wonder, what can earth teach us, the animals, the birds and the flowers, the trees and the mountains, what do they teach us of God? What if we were to walk as earth?

Maybe this is what Jesus, and St Francis are both saying, listen to the birds, observe the animals, look at the flowers, spend time with the ocean, and if you are still, they will teach you everything there is to know about God our creator, about life.

Pope Francis, who took his papal name from St Francis of Assisi, writes in his encyclical, *Laudate Si*⁴:

“LAUDATO SI’, mi’ Signore” – “Praise be to you, my Lord”. In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us.

“Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs”.⁵

Pope Francis also says throughout his encyclical:

Everything God creates is a reflection of God. God loves it.

Each creature is a place of Divine presence.

Everything is a caress of God.

Each creature is a word of God to human beings.

We are one interrelated community before God.

We are part of nature, included in it, not separate.

And

We are called to an ecological conversion and generous care, full of tenderness for all creation. We are part of a splendid universal communion.

Last century, Teilhard de Chardin also recognised that every act of evolving nature is the self-expression of God, since the very act of nature's transcendence is the energy of divine love. God unfolds in the details of nature; thus, evolution is not only of God but is God incarnate.

³ <https://pastordawn.com/tag/progressive-sermon-luke-1222-31/>

⁴ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html accessed 3 October 2023

⁵ *Canticle of the Creatures*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1, New York-London-Manila, 1999, 113-114.

I am reminded of the Native American story handed down from generation to generation when a young person asks an elder, “What should I do if I am lost in the forest?” And the answer comes back from centuries of wisdom in this poem, *Lost* by David Wagoner

*‘Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you
are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
and you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you.
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.
No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,
you are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
where you are. You must let it find you.’⁶*

So I sit by the water, it’s rhythm soothes and challenges me and speaks of birthing and creation. I walk by the lake and notice the two baby plovers so vulnerable, yet their mother fiercely protecting them. In another time and place I look at the pomegranate fruit ripe and juicy and overflowing and I learn about God’s generosity in season. And I watch the leaves unfurl on the fig tree, and tiny figs appearing, speaking of new life, of possibility and hope in this uncertain time. I gaze at the changing colours of the Brindabellas, and give thanks to the artist. I sit still. I look. I listen. I notice, and I do not worry because I’m totally immersed in prayer. Try it. Look again.

⁶ <https://palacegatecounsellingservice.wordpress.com/2015/05/26/lost-david-whyte-beyond-meds/>