

October 3, 2021
Season of Creation - Year B (Word) - Week 4 (Mountain)
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Isaiah 65:17-25
Psalm 48:1-11
Romans 8:28-39
Mark 16:14-18

May I speak with God who is Creator, Word, and Holy Spirit.

Today is a fun day. That's because it's not just the 19th Sunday after Pentecost. It's also the annual Blessing of the Animals.

Last year, most churches had to do the blessings via picture, including of my family's then-brand-new kitten, Finn McCool. A year later, it is so wonderful to see the animals in person.

Yet today is not just about animals like Finn. It's about the whole earth, and perhaps even the broader cosmos. In addition to the Blessing of the Animals, today is the Feast of St. Francis, patron saint of animals and ecology. It's also the final day of the Season of Creation – an annual church season for renewing, repairing and restoring our relationship to God and to God's creation, including the earth, its animals, and one another.

All of today's readings have something to say about creation. That makes sense; this particular set of readings was chosen specifically for the Season of Creation – but I would argue that just about every Sunday you can find something environmental in the appointed Scriptures. That's because God's design for creation is that all life and all things are interdependent.

Whatever you're reading about, I guarantee it is connected to nature and to the rest of creation. But it's especially true about today's readings, which center on the theme of hope.

Hope. What an appropriate theme for St. Francis Day. There's a famous prayer attributed to St. Francis, which we'll say together later in the service, that includes the line, "Where there is despair, let us sow hope."

With Delta spreading, democracy under threat, and climate change growing deadlier and deadlier, hope is something I think a lot of us could use a bit more of right now.

St. Paul says that hope is faith in things unseen. According to Merriam Webster, to hope means "to cherish a desire with anticipation: to want [and expect] something to happen or be true." The word "hope" can also be a synonym for trust. Perhaps that's why the Book of Common Prayer says our hope is in the Lord, and we shall never hope in vain.

And that's the message of today's lessons. Our trust, our hope, is in God, who is always present with us, no matter how much despair we feel.

This chapter of Isaiah was written shortly after the end of the Hebrew exile in Babylon – and what a beautiful image it paints: Out of the ashes of the old, conquered Jerusalem, the prophet says, God will build a new Jerusalem, one full only of joy, one where no infant ever dies. “Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating.” All the things we grieve, all the heartbreaks that choke us; in God, they will be washed away. Despite the darkness of today, there is reason to hope for a better tomorrow.

Paul tells the Romans something similar: That Christ's love for us is forever. That neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor climate change, nor white supremacy, nor COVID-19, nor fascism, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

There may be days that we don't feel that hope, or even that love. Perhaps that's how the Hebrews felt – but their exile did end. Maybe it's how some in the Church in Rome felt 2000 years ago, hiding in the shadows from rulers who would kill them – but Paul, a man who had once ordered those executions himself, still preached hope.

What Paul understood about hope is that you can't have Easter without first going through Good Friday. As Christians with the hope of the resurrection, death doesn't have to quash our hope – it can strengthen it.

Today's passage from Mark is an example of that: something that at first glance may look negative, but is actually quite hopeful. When we hear Jesus say those who do not believe will be condemned, we might worry that he's saying non-Christians go to hell.

But I don't think that's the case. Although Jesus speaks of non-believers, he doesn't go into details about what exactly it is they're supposed to believe. What if Jesus is not talking about his own resurrection? What if Jesus means resurrection in general? What if he means the eternal existence of new life and hope, with his own bodily resurrection meant as a powerful example?

God is calling us not to believe in one specific historical event, but rather, to recognize that there is always power in the divine to redeem ourselves no matter how bad we get – and to redeem our neighbors, our enemies, even creation itself. For God, nothing and no one is ever too far gone.

The hope of the resurrection, that promise of new life, is a prominent theme not just in the Gospel but in God's design for creation. In 1988, more than one-third of Yellowstone National Park was scorched by a gigantic fire. Many thought the park was lost. Some animal species were decimated. But other species began to thrive with the ecological balance reset, and today, more than 30 years later, almost all of the vegetation has recovered.

A similar story is unfolding around the volcano Mt. St. Helens. Scientists are still studying both recoveries to learn about the cycle of death and resurrection in nature.

Resurrection is true. Resurrection is real. We, as members of creation but especially as Christians, will always have the hope of the resurrection. And that is a hope, Jesus tells us in Mark, that we are not to keep to ourselves. Such hope is good news so tremendous that it must be shared not just with the rest of humanity, Mark writes, but with the whole of creation.

What would it mean to consider these hopeful verses in light of the life of St. Francis of Assisi, patron saint of animals and ecology, on this, the eve of his feast day?

Born in 1182, St. Francis is best known for creating the Franciscan monastic orders, for his vow of poverty, his use of nature to praise God, and his service to the poor. The Episcopal Church's biography of Francis describes him as "the most popular and admired [saint], but probably the least imitated."

Francis grew up wealthy, indulging in excessive luxury and wearing only the finest clothing. But with time, exposure to the poor, and a series of visions, he began to turn away from that lifestyle. Standing before the local bishop, Francis renounced his family inheritance, tore off those fancy clothes, and wandered the hills outside town. He became a nurse, bringing hope to the sick just as Jesus had done, then founded his famous monastic order.

Growing cynical of luxury, Francis learned that neither fancy clothes, nor family expectations, nor classism, nor arrogance, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Dying to his old life, he was resurrected to a new one.

The challenge of our faith is to likewise set aside the destructive, radical individualism and greed by which society measures us and which Francis's father had encouraged in him, and instead, "to know Christ and the power of his resurrection."

How exactly did Francis know Christ? Through creation – both its human and non-human elements. Francis grew closer to Jesus by spending time with the poor and the sick in their suffering, and by spending time in prayer outside, wandering the hills with his fellow Franciscans, singing as they walked. It is even said that he preached to the birds.

It makes sense that Francis loved creation. Nature wasn't just part of his spiritual life. It was also where he found hope and resurrection in his personal life. Francis likely suffered from what we now recognize as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. As a young man, Francis was a soldier [who](#) "saw men he knew since childhood torn limb from limb in a devastating battle, and was taken prisoner for a year, thrown in a dark, damp hole in the ground."

His own trauma led Francis to identify with the poor and sick in their trauma. He found his hope, his healing, and his relationship with God through animals, through musical travels in Italy's hillside nature, and through his monastic community – not through his money.

Francis didn't keep that hope to himself, either. As Jesus commanded the disciples, Francis shared the good news with the lepers he served, he shared it with the birds to whom he preached, and he shared it with the whole church by starting a selfless, service-focused monastic order.

Perhaps – like Francis and like Jesus himself, who went to gardens and the wilderness to pray – we can find that same hope of the resurrection by also turning away from radical individualism and material profit and towards the beauty of the divine: the image of God revealed in our neighbors, human and non-human alike. We root ourselves in the Creator by caring for creation.

In the 1200s, service to the poor and protecting nature may have been seen as two separate things, but today, they are deeply intertwined. Climate change impacts everyone, but no one more than the poor and marginalized. Fossil-fuel infrastructure and toxic-waste sites are disproportionately built in neighborhoods of color. The worst wildfire and hurricane seasons on record are now hitting the poor with sky-high relocation costs and medical bills.

St. Francis would be the first to recognize the need for environmental justice: We cannot love our neighbors or serve the oppressed without also caring for the creation on which they depend.

How exactly do we do that?

By praying for those in need, praying for the victims of climate disasters, praying for the Episcopal Church's creation-care team, and opening our hearts so that these prayers may guide each of us to our own actions.

By reducing our carbon footprints through eating less meat, driving less often, and turning off the air conditioners and space heaters.

By demanding that our civic leaders do the same thing in more systemic ways, such as stopping new fossil-fuel infrastructure and helping marginalized communities navigate a just economic transition to a renewable energy future.

As we take these and other steps to care for creation, there is one more lesson from St. Francis that I think we ought to keep in mind – and that is to root all things in Christ, ensuring that our actions are motivated not by economics or politics, but by faith.

This is what made St. Francis so special, and his ministries so successful: He grounded all he did in Christ and in the hope of the resurrection.

We don't serve the poor because it feels good. We don't "go green" purely for economic reasons. It was only when Francis realized that there was something bigger than himself, a loving, liberating, Creator whose good news was worth sharing, that he found purpose, joy, and hope – for himself, and for creation.

May that be said of us, and all of us.

Amen.