St. Thomas's Episcopal Church
Sunday, October 4, 2026

Feast of Saint Francis

I work at the round table in the Vesting Room during the week; it's a bright, sunny spot and because of all the windows I get a steady flow of smiles and waves from our Day School students, which of course I love. I'm really just a few feet from the first grade classroom, which is around the corner, and though I can't see the room, I hear the teacher's voice from time to time over the gentle din. She's kind and there's no edge in her voice, but there are a couple of names I do hear her call patiently *and* quite regularly. Most often it's Sebastian, a wonderful kid with lots of energy that in a classroom setting needs to be gently managed. The word I think best describes him is irrepressible. And while that's tough on his teachers from time to time, for me as the chaplain it's wonderful because Sebastian's greatest love is music. When I start a song, he fills with joy, a big, broad smile on his face, and music just bursts forth from him. If that's in morning chapel, though he's only about this big, Sebastian's voice can be heard in every corner of this sanctuary. And here's what's best of all. It instantly catches. Everyone in the room smiles seeing him smile. We all sing with that much more joy and abandon when we hear him sing. Those who "can't sing" suddenly can. Whatever it is that fills Sebastian winds up filling this place and spilling over to us all, no doubt even beyond the confines of our half-hour together.

Friends, today is the feast day of Francis of Assisi, among the most-loved of all the saints. His special day won't fall on a Sunday for another 11 years, but even if that weren't true, it would be worth our time to linger over him for a few moments this morning. And here's what I want to say about Francis. Francis was so filled with something we can only call the Spirit, or love, or divine fire, or holy joy, that it just burst forth from him. It was uncontainable, irrepressible, and that was true for him from an early age right until he took his final breaths. I felt this rare alignment of Francis's day with a Sunday justified adding a new Francis biography or two to my library even though I knew they all tell essentially the same story. But I loved reading it again. And once again the basics were all there. The young Francis is a merrymaker who loves people and whose joy is infectious; a teenaged Francis joins the fight against an oppressive ruling class with passion and a sense of call; and that call finally and so famously finds shape and substance over time as an adult Francis sheds everything to heal, to rebuild, to devote himself utterly God and to see and behold and honor that God in all persons, in all living beings, in everything, everyone, everywhere.

Each time I open a new book and read the Francis story again, there's a story I always hope will be there. And it always is. It's the story of Francis's care for and commitment to the many in his time who were afflicted with leprosy. We think of it as a disfiguring skin disease, and it is, but it's worth remembering how much more it meant to suffer from it in the Middle Ages. First, and it's hard to even say this, in many regions it was the custom to perform a "death rite" for lepers marking them as, essentially, dead to the world. The disease affected the skin, yes, but also hands and feet, which took on the appearance of claws. Eyes hollowed as blindness set in. Lepers were required to wear special clappers so that others would know they were nearby and could avoid them. As a young person, Francis did all he could to avoid contact with lepers, as did everyone. But over time, the holy joy, the divine fire that filled him couldn't be contained and it spilled over

into something he never could have anticipated. In the most widely-reported vignette, he saw a leper approach, expected to cross the street as usual, and found himself instead filled with love for one Francis now saw, in his words, as "abandoned by the world" much like the one whom, for Francis, lay at the center of it all. A man of sorrows, he now understood, as words from Isaiah flooded through him, acquainted with grief. And so instead of crossing the street, he approached the man, looked into his eyes, greeted him and kissed him.

The holy joy, the divine fire that filled Francis could never be contained. There are many stories about Francis but that's the line that runs through them all. And it's the line that runs through our readings today. Though not chosen for Francis, they couldn't be more perfect. Paul of Tarsus and Francis of Assisi in so many ways share a similar story of early passion redirected by God for love and service and for the equipping of faith. Paul and Francis were both born into times of violence, corruption, fear and brutality. Both were fortunate enough to be born into a tiny artisan class in times of nearly-universal poverty, Paul to tentmakers, Francis to cloth and silk merchants. And both made the very distinctive choice to give it up completely, to relinquish all advantage in a fragile and dangerous world. They made the unlikeliest move of all, embracing what can only be called downward mobility, the self-emptying of the one whose fire filled them and whom they longed to follow and serve but most of all to know. And this is how they could know him best. By walking his walk and living his way. And it caught, as holy fire always does. For Francis, it meant a total and complete embrace of all things living as sister, brother, whether moon or wind or wolf or bird, Mother Earth or even Sister Death, ready to embrace us gently and inevitably as she does all of God's good creation. It flowed from Francis, it flowed from that fire and that joy and it couldn't be contained and it caught. And it transformed a generation and then another and then another still. The love of God that fills us can't be held. It bursts to be shared and shared again.

And, to land all of this with the gospel, sometimes, sadly, it doesn't. Sometimes it isn't shared. In the gospels, there is nothing that breaks Jesus's heart more than to see this holy fire go out, to see it extinguished as it's held back by those entrusted with it. Jesus speaks here to those meant to stoke and nurture and cultivate the flame. Instead, what they might share they protect as they live institutional lives, seeking their own comfort and security. It's important to note that Jesus isn't speaking to all religious leaders and he certainly isn't condemning an entire tradition. He's calling out the coziness of this group he's come to observe and know. Sadly, they appear in all places and times including, of course, our own. The call to tend that flame, to stoke that fire, to rise above institutional coziness, to share the light and love that fill and fuel us lavishly, is ours. And it's ours in our own time of violence, corruption, fear, and the bewildering normalization of coarseness, of divisiveness, othering, and brutality.

The call was theirs and they answered it with love and embrace, with self-yielding and with the shining of an inextinguishable light. They answered it allowing all of that which filled them to burst outward, to overflow irrepressibly. Kind of like that little voice that fills this place that isn't so little anymore when it comes from a heart just bursting to share holy joy that the rich acoustic catches and carries and winds up landing on us and filling us and even changing us. The call was theirs and it's now ours, filled so palpably in this place with the fire and joy of this music and this fellowship and this redemptive, restoring table. And so the question is a simple and beautiful one for us to behold today and as our season together unfolds. What's our call as St. Thomas's — as us all and as us each? Surely as we work that out in our walk together we do so fueled by the fire

lit and sustained so vividly and palpably by Francis, the one whose embrace knew no limit. I close this morning with his words. *Our call is to heal, to unite what is divided, and to walk each other home.* Yes. Thanks be to God. Amen.