

Proper 22 YA 2023; St. Francis and St. Clare

Blessed by Creation

By the Rev. Salying Wong

- The heavens declare the glory of God, *
and the firmament shows his handiwork.
- 2 One day tells its tale to another, *
and one night imparts knowledge to another.
- 3 Although they have no words or language, *
and their voices are not heard,
- 4 Their sound has gone out into all lands, *
and their message to the ends of the world.

This psalm often resounds in my heart when I'm in nature. Most recently, it sang in me when I watched the humpback whales come alongside our touring boat when I went out to the pelagic ocean waters a few weeks ago. The whales came very close, and we watched them stitch in and out of the water. They worked together to corral fish in a circle. They were followed by the sea lions and then the gulls. The tour was looking for albatrosses and shearwaters; but the generosity of the deep brought many more gifts. On that day, pods of dolphins also came to greet us. Plus fur seals, blue sharks, moon jellyfish, and, of course, the birds—black-footed albatross riding the thermals from Hawaii, all the way out here, looking for food to take back to their young. We saw jaegers chasing down elegant terns to see if they could get a free lunch. Tufted puffins, rhinoceros auklets, murre and murrelets, and even a Nazca booby who caught a ride on a containership from the Galapagos, all in this vast far frontier of the pelagic deep.

A creature of the land, traveling out there felt like traveling to another world—a world that had its own time, its own culture, and its utter lack of concern for my perseverations: what shall I wear and what shall I eat? And what a relief, to be freed of the delusion that my concerns were immense and heavy. What a relief to feel my diminution in the grandiose terrain of the waters. So much negative space. Water, water, water—and now a seal. Water, water, water, and off in the distance, the cry of jaeger. Humans often strive to feel big, when diminution is freedom. This is what Francis and Clare of Assisi found—the joy of being small, humble, one small part of creation, and not its pinnacle, not its master.

Human striving and avarice is an engine of violence. We hear this in the gospel reading. Francis rejected this life. Born of a wealthy fabric merchant, Francis grew up very privileged. He was given the best clothes, the best education and was expected to make the family proud by taking on the best job. For a long time, Francis thought as his family thought. He would seek wealth and power and glory. But then. Then God said, rebuild my church. And, seeing that he stood in a ruined church, Francis took it literally and started putting one stone back upon the other. But, he needed some funds to finish the repair. So, he took his father's most expensive purple cloth and sold it. When his father found out, he beat Francis to a bloody pulp. Mouth dripping with blood, body bruised and wounded, Francis stood before his father and all the village and removed every stitch of clothing. Everyone could see what his father did to him. They were horrified; they bowed their eyes. Before all, Francis gave his clothes to his father and walked away.

This was not the first time his father beat him. But it was the worst. The violence that fell upon Francis, he inverted. He would never do that to another human being or any other being. Instead, he would bless. He would bless the birds, the flower bud, the sow. He would bless the brother monks he would gather around him. He would bless Clare, who knew his story.

But, he would first need to bless himself. How? God sent him a leper. Francis was deathly afraid of lepers. He squirmed at their missing digits, missing noses and ears, patches of white skin here and there, patches of hair on the head. He could

not bless this. When they came through, he would hide. But then. God encouraged him not to hide. God encouraged him to stay put. And when one came up to him to ask for alms, Francis did what he thought he could never do. He embraced the leper. When he did that, he embraced himself, all the parts of him that he shunned, including that child that begged for mercy from a brutalizing father. He embraced the child that was himself.

Now he could bless, because he knew that blessing is really about reteaching the one being blessed its belovedness. So, he blessed the sow, the flower bud, the birds. He blessed creation through his knowledge of their belovedness which drew out of his knowledge of his own belovedness.

This blessing is always mutual. The birds also blessed him by showing him his belovedness; the flower bud also blessed him, and the sow also blessed him. And when he needed the language of humans, he walked with Clare or a beggar. When he made trips to the village, knowing that he might encounter his father, he would bring a beggar or Clare with him. And when he saw his father and all the abuse and violence would return and paralyze him, his companion would whisper, "You are the beloved." [whisper in one ear and see how far it goes]

And Francis would remember who he was and he would be able to keep going.

This is what it all comes down to, how we really serve each other—it is by giving this blessing. I felt this blessing from the whales, from the birds, from the seals. I hope they felt a blessing from us. And when we need the language of humans, we come here. We bless each other in the place of deepest hurt, by saying, "You are the beloved." You are invited to the table to receive who we are; the message of the eucharist is, "You are the beloved."

Today, we will bless the animals for they are messengers of our belovedness and today, we give that message back to them. Indeed, all of creation is a message of our God's blessing.