The Feast of St. Francis

Ephesians 1:3-14 Mark 1:9-13

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 10-4-20

I'm very grateful for the opportunity to observe the Feast of St. Francis and the "blessing of the animals" with you this morning because, as a Lutheran, I've never had the opportunity to do so. Which is not to say Lutherans never recognize this feast day or the Saint for whom it's named, or that they never offer a "blessing of the animals." Some pastors do. And some congregations do. But it's not all that common, and I have never had the privilege of participating in or presiding over such a celebration.

So it makes my heart very glad to do so… Not only because I have a deep respect for the witness of St. Francis and a great love of animals and the natural world. But also because it's always important for us to remember that while the Christian tradition has primarily focused its attention on the "saving actions of God on behalf of human beings," our Scriptures invite us to ponder a much more expansive understanding of God's care, concern, passion and presence for and with and in all of creation… Something St. Francis helped others to see in the 12th and 13th centuries, as he helps those of us living in the 21st century to see as well…

There is actually so much to say about St. Francis, beginning with his birth into a wealthy family in Assisi, Italy in the year 1181 and his eventual renunciation of his family's wealth and status in exchange for a life devoted to love of God and others… There are the many stories about the way Francis lived out of a vow of poverty, caring for the poor, tending to the sick, sharing compassion with all… As there are also all the legends about his affinity for animals, including the birds, who, as legend has it, used to gather around St. Francis whenever he preached about the love of God, refusing to fly away until he was finished… Legends too about how he could approach even the wildest and fiercest of animals, St. Francis having about him a presence that seemed to resonate with even the most feral of creatures.

There is so much to say about this saint and the extraordinary qualities of compassion and love he extended to every living being he encountered. But perhaps the greatest gift he brought to the world was his particular way of **seeing**… A way of seeing that can help us, I think, in this moment of such profound uncertainty, as fires burn, and hurricanes rage, and tempers flare, and injustice runs rampant, and anxieties rise, and despair grows, and cynicism infects, and poverty chokes, and the Coronavirus surges, and the political institutions upon which our country was built crumble around us, and it seems as if the center cannot not hold…

In these perilous and uncertain times, I think St. Francis's way of **seeing** can be a gift to us, as it reminds us of what lives at the heart of our faith in the midst of all that rages about us…

And in order for me to say how this is so, I will go by way of a collage, a sculpture and a story told by naturalist and writer Loren Eiseley…

The collage is actually a visual representation of our text from Ephesians this morning depicting the vision of God, the dream of God for the fullness of time… a collage I saw once in an art museum in New Mexico, inspired by the images and art work of the indigenous people of the area. The collage is entitled "The Cosmic Christ" and has, at its center, the cross of Christ, surrounded by construction paper cut-outs of stars and moons, animals (human and not) of every variety and color and size…There are mountains too, and rivers, flora, and fauna beautifully depicting St. Francis' understanding of the expansive reach of God's love in Christ, who holds all things together in heaven and on Earth…

If I was able to show you the collage this morning, you would see that the cross at the center creates an intimate connection between salamanders, stars, snow leopards and the **Sacred**… an intimate connection between goldfinches, galaxies, groundhogs and **God**… an intimate connection between mountains, mole hills, Mother Moon and the Creator **Mother**… suggesting an intimate connection between you and you and me and us and them and the love that holds us all…

The collage is reflective of St. Francis' expansive way of seeing, and reminds us of the Cosmic reach of God's love in Christ; a love that knows no conditions or boundaries… a love whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere… A love that is with us even now, despite so much evidence to the contrary…

The sculpture of which I speak was at the Leighton Gallery in Blue Hill years ago, at the top of the staircase that led to the second floor… It was a sculpture of a big bear, carved from wood, standing on his hind legs, facing away from the stairs, so what viewers saw as they made the ascent to the second floor was the back of this huge brown bear with his head held high and his arms extended outward…

Which was startling enough from the backside, but even more startling from the front side, as instead of what the viewer expected to see in terms of torso and muscle and brawn and fur, there was a large space, hollowed out, and in that space painted in bright colors, a forest full of trees and animals and birds and river and sky… all of it, flowery meadows and wild animals alike, sun light and shadows alike, **inside** the bear….

Making me, a gallery visitor, stop in my tracks, stunned by the shocking question, "Wait! I always thought the bear was in the forest, but could it be that the forest is in the bear?"

I share the image of this bear and the question it raised for me, because St. Francis saw something similar in the person of Jesus through the down-to-earth, visceral, carnal, gut-

wrenching, sinew-stretching mystery of the **incarnation**… namely that by that act of such consummate, impassioned, incarnate Love there came a recognition of the presence of God not only **with us** and the world God so loves, but **in us** and the world God so loves, just as the world God so loves is **in** the heart of God…

St. Francis seeing this incarnate **"in-ness"** at a time in church history when the preferred image of God was removed, over and above… ('Perhaps 'with us' as well, acquiesced the church fathers, "for those who believe 'correctly' and act 'rightly' and give 'generously' to the Glory of God…")

But an **"in-ness"** that dared enter **not only light**, but darkness, **not only the brightness of morning**, but the shadows of evening, **not only blossoming flowers,** but feral foxes and wild-running wolves, **not only joys**, but also the deepest of sorrows, the most egregious of sins, and the most final of deaths for the sake of taking it all **in… into the heart of God, where, by the power of incarnate, down-to-earth, particular love, love might be seen and sensed and known, in the world, even there**…even here… (Bringing to mind for me the woman suffering with cancer who once said to her pastor friend when the pastor friend called to ask if she could come for a visit… the woman with cancer responding, "Yes, you can come. But don't come to tell me about Jesus. Come to be Jesus for me.")

An **"in-ness"** like that… What an unexpected intimacy… What a scandalous divinity… What a blessed heresy… As if to suggest that were we to see a sculpture of Jesus through the eyes of St. Francis, what we might see is Jesus with his arms outstretched, his body hollowed out, and in that empty space, a picture painted of the whole world…

No exceptions… (just as Mark suggested in our Gospel text for this morning, as, at the end of Jesus' 40-day trial in the wilderness, just before he began his official ministry, he was visited by both angels and wild animals)….No exceptions... the beauty of it… the suffering of it… the wildness of it… the rawness of it… And the body of Jesus, not only **in** the world, but the world **inside** the body of Jesus, the cosmic presence of Divine love made **particular** in every moment and movement and molecule and muscle open to the transforming power of Love's **in**carnate presence… Because of course, love that is not made particular is not love at all…

Somehow in these days of such deep darkness, such manifold uncertainty and untold suffering, St. Francis' invitation to us to **see** the incarnate love of God made particular **in** the world (which it is, day to day in a thousand million ways), and to see the world in all its manifold suffering and beauty, **received into the very heart and body of God,** seems like a gift of startling possibilities and the only hope we have…

A startling possibility and a hope I once glimpsed in a particularly "St. Francis kind of moment" almost a decade ago when many of us in the Blue Hill community gathered at the Blue Hill Congregational Church to mourn the drug-related death of a young woman most of us

had known since was a child… the daughter of friends we all respected and cared about deeply… friends who were very involved in the community, the school, all the things that matter in life…

And yet, as we all knew then, and which we still know now, no amount of parental love and community care can insure any of us immunity from such a tragedy. And so we all gathered at the Blue Hill Congregational church after Emily's death to comfort and support her grieving parents…

And as the centerpiece of his sermon Pastor Rob McCall related a story told by Loren Eiseley about something he witnessed when he was sitting in the woods one day at the foot of a great tree…

What he witnessed was an enormous raven sitting on a branch of a neighboring tree with a red and squirming nestling in his beak as the nestling's parents flew helplessly above the clearing… As Loren Eiseley tells the story, the raven was indifferent to the cries of the parents as he gulped, whetted his beak on the branch and sat there unmoved…

But then, as the story goes, suddenly, from the forest, small birds of a half dozen varieties fluttered into that place of suffering, drawn by the cries of the nestling's parents, the glade filling with the soft rustling and the cries of the birds who had come to bear witness to the tragedy… none of the birds daring to attack the raven, but all of them settling into branches in that glade, sighing, as Loren Eiseley writes, in silent protest for the travesty of death in their midst, until even their sighing died… And then this… As Loren Eiseley writes,

"The sighing died. It was then I saw the judgment. It was the judgment of life against death. I will never see it again so forcefully presented. I will never hear it again in notes so tragically prolonged. For in the midst of protest, they forgot the violence. There, in that clearing, the crystal sounds of a song sparrow lifted hesitantly in the hush. And finally, after painful fluttering, another took the song, and then another, the song passing from one bird to another, doubtfully at first, as though some evil thing were being slowly forgotten. Till suddenly they all took heart and sang from many throats joyously together as birds are known to sing. They sang because life is sweet and sunlight beautiful. They sang under the brooding shadow of the raven. In simple truth they had forgotten the raven, for they were the singers of life, and not of death."

When Pastor Rob McCall was finished reading Loren Eiseley's story, he said to all of us who were gathered to comfort Emily's parents… "In the midst of this devastating death of a young one so dear to all of us, we are like the birds… We come to surround Emily's parents, even under the brooding shadow of death… We come to surround them with our love and to sing…"

And then we all sang "Bright Morning Stars are Rising."

I think St. Francis would love this story. I think if we were to see what he would invite us to see in the story, it would be the mystery of a creation that is a mix of both life and death, joy and sorrow, beauty and beast, raven and song sparrow, beloved pet and wild wolf, light and shadow, love and loss, deep gratitude and grief so wrenching it leaves us limp with despair…

And I think what St. Francis would have us see is that whether we can see it or not, there is a love that holds it all, a love that holds us all… a love whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere… A love cosmic in height and width and depth, and yet particular in its incarnate presence, because love that is not particular is not love at all… **A love whose promise is Love's presence…**

I think St. Francis would encourage us to keep our eyes open to this Presence in the ordinary, everyday moments of our lives… those moments when, by the power of love made particular, made visible and tangible and real, we sense Love's presence moving in the darkness… moving in our midst…

And I think St. Francis would have us take that love into ourselves in such a way that it hollows us out, and paints inside our bodies the world God so loves… So that in word and in deed we can make that love known in the world… So we can be Jesus for the world…. So we can come together like the birds… even under the brooding shadow of death… We can come to surround the suffering, grieving world with our love and to sing….

This is the gift St. Francis gives to us this morning… The gift of seeing the God whose promise is God's presence, present with us, in us… here… now… longing for us to take this presence into ourselves and to share it in ways that can be seen and felt and known…

May it be so, dear friends… in these dark and uncertain times, may we **see** and **be** Jesus in the world God so loves, in thanksgiving for St. Francis and in the name of the one who is Emmanuel God **with** us and **in** us through it all… Amen.