

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

We have arrived at the end of the Season of Creation. We have heard God speak to Job about wild animals. We listened to the Medieval mystic Meister Eckhart meeting God in the face of a caterpillar. I spent yesterday in the woods, feeling the profound spirituality of trees and tar flowers, the silence of a world under heat, and how an oak woodland, a meadow, a laurel canyon, unlike most religions, welcomes all comers into her embrace and breathes a gospel which needs no words.

The Season of Creation ends with the Feast of St. Francis, who also spent a great deal of time outdoors and is today the patron saint of ecology. Like Job, Francis suffered mightily, and like Job, he found resolution on a mountainside, in the company of birds, in the whirlwind

of his passions, understanding the language of a wolf. Both Francis and Job began in prosperity and ended up covered with sores and scars, and in the ashes of nothing, and both met and were restored by God.

To pray in Nature is different than praying inside a church or a house, or even on a sweet walk in a local park. To meet God in the wilderness is to encounter God in ten thousand interlocking relationships. As today's passage about the wild animals affirms, God made it ALL, and indeed. I suspect that the thoughtless, self-important ostrich, flapping its flightless wings might just be a jibe at my pretensions of wisdom and power. Or as Australian indigenous author puts it, "The war between good and evil is in reality an imposition of stupidity and simplicity over wisdom and complexity."

"May you live in interesting times," says an old Chinese curse.

St. Francis lived in very interesting times. One might call him the first critic of the modern idea that we are making progress.

The son of a wealthy cloth merchant, he was born at a time of spiritual and political ferment: the spread out feudal and rural world of the earlier Middle Ages was giving way to a new and concentrated

urbanism, with clashes between church and state, clashes within the church, the rise of an affluent bourgeoisie, the creation of an urban underclass. As a young man, Francis aspired to the fashions of chivalry which had formerly been denied the sons of wealthy cloth merchants and went to war. He was captured by the Perugians and spent a year ignominiously imprisoned in a dank and damp dungeon where he both prayed and fell so very ill that his father was able to ransom him. The failure of the dreams of glory changed his life, and when he recovered and had the chance to go back into battle, he was told in a vision not to.

Feeling that he no longer fit into the society of his age, he spent a lot of time alone in forests and woods, in ruined churches, of which the little Chapel of San Damiano was a favorite. Two of his best-known experiences from that time are his encounter with the leper and the voice from the crucifix. “When I was in sin,” he wrote in his testament, “the sight of lepers nauseated me beyond measure; but then God himself led me into their company, and I had pity on them. When I became acquainted with them, what had previously nauseated me became the source of spiritual and physical consolation for me.” At another point, as

he was praying in San Damiano chapel, a voice from the crucifix said, “Francis, rebuild my church.”

At first, he tried to do this literally, by absconding with his father’s most expensive cloth and selling it, along with his horse, to buy building materials. This did nothing but make everyone mad and caused Francis to repudiate his father. With time, however, he came to understand that rebuilding the church was not about brick and mortar, but about following the teachings of Jesus and walking in his footsteps.

Like St. Augustine, Francis had complicated parents: an ambitious father and an emotional mother: Pica Bernadone had a stable and manger built in which to bear her first son. His father wanted him to be a man of the world; his mother wanted him to be a saint. Finally, and not unlike the man who would become the Buddha, in response to his family’s extreme wealth, Francis embraced extreme poverty. There, however, the resemblance stops. Buddha found a middle way. Francis did not.

Francis soon gathered a following, mostly of other aristocratic young men who were seeking something more, and giving up all they

had, they, too, embraced Lady Poverty, entitled to just enough food and clothing to live on, but nothing else. Francis said, “If we have money, we shall also have to have armed men to guard it.” A commentator reflects, “The tragedies of civilized man are expressed in those few words.”¹

But there’s more: poverty is a purely human construct which cannot exist without the opposite construct of wealth. In the warlike, grasping cultures of the West, wealth is essentially an act of plunder—today we call it “extraction industries” but it’s pretty much the same thing, while poverty is the wound inflicted upon the plundered.

The natural world may be a place of clarity and wisdom, but it is not a place of poverty. In a well-balanced ecosystem, there is enough for all. Thus, choosing ecology over economy made Francis the richest man of all, but the culture around him did not permit him to see this, despite Jesus’ direct warning in today’s gospel: So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.

¹ <https://catholicexchange.com/st-francis-the-voice-from-san-damiano/>

In order to perfect his spirit, Francis mortified his flesh excessively, for Western civilization is all about excess, whether of acquisition or renunciation.

I began this reflection with part of the creation story in Genesis 2, because I want to end the season of creation with another question. Last week I asked us to ponder what our true niche in the ecosystem is. This week I ask you what manner of creature we are. Are we, as the French Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin asserts, spiritual beings living human lives, or, are we, as Choctaw elder Steven Charleston teaches, creatures of earth climbing a ladder toward heaven? Of course we are both, but it makes a difference where we start. To acknowledge ourselves as creatures of the earth is to accept humility, humus, fertility, growth. To believe we are spirits trapped in mortal bodies tempts us to try and escape our fate.

I would like to suggest that for much of Christian history, the spiritual has been emphasized at the expense of the earthly. St. Paul started the whole idea of the “flesh” being sinful while the “spirit” was holy. “Flesh” was female, muddy and insatiable, while “spirit” was

masculine, robust, and clear. One brought you down. The other raises you up.

My experience as an embodied person bears none of this out. My experience has shown that the earth is for the most part dependable while the spiritual world has the capacity to be more than a little unruly: desire, anger, ambition, gluttony, bingeing, these are not fleshly in and of themselves; they represent how spirits use our bodies to have fun. Political rallies, the Super Bowl, mass movements, weird cults, these are highly spiritual occasions, made possible by the fact of having a body. We are a people of appetite, inheritors of a passionate sense of aspiration, a heroic ethic, all of which reflect spiritual excesses acted out in our bodies. St. Paul, St. Augustine, and St. Francis all experienced dramatic conversion experiences, but did not, as a result of those experiences, discover equanimity, the peace which passes all understanding. They simply redirected their former passions and aspirations in a more godly direction.

The Season of Creation reminds us that Earth knows what she's doing. Re-read the wild animals passage from Job. Go and contemplate a

caterpillar. Touch the cool bark of a Madrone and praise the living waters, hidden within.

We don't need to tame nature. We need to come to terms with ourselves. In God's name. Amen.