

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber
The Feast of St. Francis of Assisi
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St Francis of Assisi died 800 years ago. He is from another time. And we could certainly use his spirit in these times.

We are living in a world that often seems to be about what the powerful can get for themselves. What if we could be more like Francis? Francis, who renounced his family's wealth. Francis, who didn't even go to live in a monastery, to have a comfortable home and a nice chapel to pray in and some sort of trade like making books or raising honeybees with which to pay for food and clothing. Francis chose to live in the poor part of town, and to beg for his food.

We are living in a world where some folks are being discarded and worse, where a Doordash driver in Austin was shot by ICE and then imprisoned overnight, with the bullet still lodged in his back. We need a Francis. Francis, who overcame his own prejudices and resistances and kissed a leper on the mouth. Francis, who chose to live among people with leprosy and minister to them.

My college, Cornell, has been in the news for a horrible reason this week, for seven fraternity brothers assaulting a woman, their fellow student. For the seeming inadequate response of the University. For other fraternity members who didn't stop the harm. We look at this news and wonder, how can it still be like this? Francis knew a different way to be a man 800 years ago. Francis, who encouraged and worked alongside Sister Clare, who supported her ministry and respected her as a peer.

We are living in a world of such division. Republicans and Democrats. Those who came here generations ago and those who got here more recently. The US versus the rest of the world. Humans versus nature. Francis saw things differently. He saw that he was connected to everything and everyone, to the poor and marginalized, to animals, to his Brother Sun and Sister Moon and everything God made.

Now, the world Francis lived in was not so very different from our world, with our struggles and divisions and inequalities. In Francis' time as now, people naturally wanted to be like the rich man in today's Gospel, building bigger barns and silos for their stuff. And a few did just that -- Francis' own father was one of them.

In Francis' time as now, there was a lot of everyone for himself and us versus them, cities and local territories fighting against each other vying for power. In his young days, Francis dreamed of being a knight and having great victories in these battles.

But something changed inside Francis. Something changed so much that Francis became what would have been judged then and would be judged today as a complete fool. A man of privilege who chose to throw a brown sack over his head and live like a beggar. An educated person who walked around with a silly smile on his face and talked to birds.

Something changed inside Francis. Not in one day. Francis noticed things in his world, like the crumbling churches in poor villages, such a contrast with the monasteries that looked like royal castles. He encountered people, like the person with leprosy he was moved to embrace as a brother. Francis prayed and listened. He heard God's voice saying, Francis, rebuild my Church. He heard God in everything around him, saying, Do you know when the mountain goat gives birth?

Do you observe the calving of the deer? Listen Francis, said God, and learn to see things as I see them.

Something changed inside Francis, bit by bit. The more Francis got close, to people, to places, to nature, the more he prayed and listened and observed, the more it opened him to the immensity of God's world, to God's abundant creation and love, to how everything is, to how we are, all connected. To how we are all one in Christ.

Something about this weirdo in a brown sack touched the hearts of others, and Francis became the head of a community of people who wanted to be just like him, a community that exists to this day. And don't we need more Francises in our world right now?

So let us pray to be changed inside, St Martin's, to be more like Francis. Let us pray to hear God's voice, to be united with all creation, to be Christ's body in the world. Let us bless the animals, as we will do later. And let us bless each other. Turn to your neighbor and say, You are my brother, my sister, my sibling. Listen to the sound of the birds and know that they are our siblings also. Smell the air. Feel the ground under your feet. Awaken yourself to your connection to all of God's creation.

St Martin's, in the name of Francis, go out and be a fool for Christ. Bless each other, bless your animal friends, give something away, kiss a leper, talk to some birds. Be an antidote to the greed, violence, and division of this world. Bring Christ's healing, Christ's wholeness, with you, as you go from this place. Amen.