

## St. Joe's St Francis sermon

By far, the best-known stories of St. Francis of Assisi involve his interaction with animals.

There is of course his preaching to the birds. The account has Francis coming upon a group of birds in a field and walking among them, so close that his cloak even brushed against them, and exhorting them to praise God with all their energy: "My little sisters the birds, you owe much to God, your Creator, and you ought to sing his praise at all times and in all places!" The birds were rapt, of course in their attention to Francis. After the sermon Francis blessed them with the sign of the cross and gave them leave to fly away. The birds took off from the field, singing joyously, and broke into four groups, flying north, south, east, and west bearing their joyous song of God's cruciform grace in every direction.

Another famous story is that of the wolf at Gubbio. Francis was living in a town called Gubbio and a large wolf, fierce and terrible, came into town and started attacking and eating animals and people. The people were not able to harm the wolf and so they were terrified, unable to leave the town. Francis decided to approach the wolf and as the wolf began to attack, Francis again made the sign of the cross and said, "brother wolf, never harm me or anyone else." The wolf stopped and as Francis preached to him, he was abashed, head down and tail between his legs. Francis arranged an agreement between the wolf and the community, that the wolf would no longer attack and that the people would feed and care for the wolf. The wolf lived among the people of the town in peace for two years until his death from old age. The wolf's last years were lived as a sign, the story says, of Francis' sanctity and virtue and almost certainly of the power of love over fear.

A little different kind of story, but far and away my favorite is when Francis is walking on a road with a companion and sees a lamb in the midst of a flock of goats. Francis *naturally* recognizes this lamb to be Christ in the midst his persecutors. It was imperative that they rescue Christ the Lamb from among the goats, but Francis and his companion friar had no money to buy it from the farmer. Fortunately a passing merchant bought the lamb for Francis as a gift. This story and the presence of the lamb with Francis for the rest of his journey blessed everyone he met. He later gave the lamb to a group of sisters who shorn it and presented Francis with a cloak woven from the wool, which Francis received with great joy. For Francis, this particular lamb was not a symbol of Christ to be

considered, but instead an active and significant image of Christ's innocence and gracious sacrifice that demanded action of him and yielded wonderful gifts to all.

The last story about the lamb raises the question for me about the saint's perception of the world. What is it exactly that Francis saw in these situations? What made him think that birds needed to hear the word proclaimed? What made him believe that he could or should exact peace between a murderous wolf and a terrified village? What caused him to see Christ in a lamb in the midst of a field of goats?

We can look to Isaiah's vision for the answer to these questions. We find in Isaiah much of the same rather foolish natural harmony that we find in the hagiography of Francis: the wolf dwelling with the lamb, the toddler playing among snakes, the lion eating straw like the ox. This reality is the effect of the coming of the Messiah, a man anointed with the Spirit of the Lord, given wisdom, understanding, righteousness, and might. He will judge the poor and meek with justice and through his very speech "smite the earth" and "slay the wicked." He will enact a kingdom of peace, which Isaiah images as a holy mountain: "They shall not hurt or destroy" there "for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea." Indeed, the whole earth shall be soaked, drowned, baptized in the knowledge and love of God.

We, of course, know the shoot from the stump of Jesse, to refer to Jesus. It is Christ who is the hope of the poor and the relief of the world that has been groaning under its bondage to decay since the fall. Francis, like us, knew this to be true. At the same time, Francis had the rare gift of being able to see this kingdom coming and orient his entire life to its arc of justice and harmony. Francis could see evidence of the kingdom everywhere he went and in seeing it, he was compelled to act: to preach, to reconcile, to take up Christ. For Francis, ALL things pointed to Christ and his kingdom. Nothing was neutrally outside the scope of the intrusion of God's holy mountain. The signs were everywhere and they could not be ignored. St. Francis had a certain way of seeing that required action. He could never presume to be personally removed from God's kingdom work. There was no stepping outside of it. It is appropriate that this prayer is attributed to him: "make me an instrument of your peace." Francis could see the building of the kingdom of God right before his eyes and so he could participate in it. His participation further reinforced his seeing.

What is it that enabled Francis to see as he did? His life is instructive on this point. Francis' graced vision was the result of a deep and enacted love of God. Francis was born the son of a wealthy cloth merchant. After encounters with

beggars and a vision of the risen Christ Francis renounced his wealth, home, and property to depend on the grace of God and generosity of others to sustain him. He followed the call of God which led him to preaching the good news of Christ and repentance from sins, caring for lepers, and physically rebuilding the dilapidated church of San Damiano in Assisi. The fruit of such a life was unspeakable joy, but undoubtedly unspeakable pain as well. Francis received more than one vision of Christ and clearly exulted in life in God's world. At the same time, such a poor and wandering life was a difficult even as Francis received its trials as grace. Near the end of his life, Francis miraculously received the stigmata, the very wounds of Christ on his feet, hands, and side, which often bled and remained with him for several years until his death. His life was one of increasing joy, increasing pain, and increasing love of God.

Dare we ask how it is that we can see like Francis? If discipleship is the imitation of Christ then we find in the life of St. Francis the truth expressed in the daily office collect for Friday mornings: The Son of God did not go up to joy before he suffered pain. Nor did he enter into glory before he was crucified. Indeed, the way of the cross is the only way of life and peace. It is in losing that we win, in dying that we live. To follow Jesus is to know deep pain on the way to deep joy. This is the uncomfortable if not terrifying paradox of Christian discipleship and it is apparent in the most basic practices of our life together. We must die and be born again, drowned in the waters of baptism, trusting in God to bear us anew into life. It is Christ's body broken and blood spilled that we must take into our bodies if we are to abide in Christ and he in us. To practice the works of mercy is to continually stand before the forces of death; hunger, thirst, sickness, despair, sin; that may or more often may not yield to our ministrations. These are among the primary means of God's grace and they invite us to death even as they summon us to life. It is only in dying that we know the correlate joys of living. The joy that we know by this work is the renewing of our very minds, the healing of our blindness so that we, like Francis, can see the kingdom of God suffusing the world and act as instruments of Christ's peace.