

Reflections on Saint Francis's *Canticle of the Creatures* Episcopal Networks Collaborative



Bellini, Giovanni, d. 1516. *Saint Francis in the Desert* from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville TN.



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Table of Contents

List of Contributors	Page 2
Introduction	Page 3
<i>The Canticle of the Creatures</i>	Page 4
Reflection: Verses 1 & 2	Page 5
Reflection: Verses 3 & 4	Page 6
Reflection: Verse 5	Page 7
Reflection: Verse 6	Page 9
Reflection: Verse 7	Page 11
Reflection: Verse 8	Page 13
Reflection: Verse 9	Page 15
Reflection: Verses 10 & 11	Page 17
Reflection: Verses 12 & 13	Page 19
Reflection: Verse 14	Page 20

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Mick Etchison is 18 years old. He is a writer who specializes in reporting on the environment and global politics. He was born in Los Angeles but has spent the majority of his life in Georgia, particularly in Atlanta and Columbus. For primary, middle, and high school education, he was homeschooled by his terrific parents along with my three equally amazing siblings whom he loves very much. Currently, he is a member of St. Thomas Episcopal Church of Columbus Georgia and serve as an active member of their Creation Care Team.

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Anne Rowthorn has [published four collections of ecological writings](#), including *Earth and all the Stars, Feast of the Universe, Song of the Universe*, and with her husband Jeffery, an award-winning liturgical book, *God's Good Earth: Praise and Prayer for Creation*. She established two community gardens and is a founding member of the Inter-Religious Eco-Justice Network. Few things give her more pleasure than cutting into a juicy ripe tomato straight from the vine, and she never ceases to marvel at the abundance that is created from one tiny seed.

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Introduction

*The whole earth is filled with awe at your wonders;
where morning dawns, where evening fades,
you call forth songs of joy. (Ps. 65:8)*

As the Psalmist declares Creation's awe and love for its Creator in ancient times; we in modernity are left to ponder our own songs of joy in thanksgiving of Creator and Creation. Amid forest fires, racial injustice, a virus with disproportionate impact on the poor, hurricanes, the increasing wealth gap, and so much other pain finding space for joy can feel insincere or misplaced. However, despite all the pain, God's calm, loving presence persists coursing throughout the Community of Creation. Francis of Assisi lived capturing the essence of Creation; that is, being filled with awe at God's wonders despite distressing conditions. The *Canticle of Creatures* also known as the *Canticle of the Sun* is fertile, inspiring ground for reflection.

A few of the reflections below read like wonderful love songs to God our Creator, while others capture the writhing agony of living in a world lacking justice. Collectively, they capture the inspirational life of Saint Francis of Assisi. Saint Francis lived with deep reverence for all aspects of Creation which fueled a passion for just relationships and peace. Written with care, each reflection seeks to praise God and the entire Community of Creation for its very nature while maintaining hope that we may enter into living in a new paradigm, wherein we are not abusing ourselves and other aspects of the Community of Creation. We hear the Songs of Joy. We marvel at their glorious harmonies; we just want all voices in the Community to sing and be valued for their intrinsic worth as part of God and God's Creation. We pray our reflections spark a sense of transformative love into which Saint Francis so clearly lived. Healthy love exists in cycles of learning, praying, acting, and resting. We humbly hope these reflections serve as both a springboard into activism and as a prayerful moment of introspective rest.

-Steven Simpkins Editor and Co-Chair of Lectionary Project Committee

Canticle of the Creatures¹

1. Most High, all powerful, good Lord,
 Yours are the praises, the glory, and the honor, and all blessing.
2. To You alone, Most High, do they belong,
 and no human is worthy to mention Your name.
3. Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures,
 especially Sir Brother Sun,
 Who is the day and through whom You give us light.
4. And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor;
 and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.
5. Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
 in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful.
6. Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
 and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather,
 through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures.
7. Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
 who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.
8. Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
 through whom You light the night,
 and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.
9. Praised by You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,
 who sustains and governs us,
 and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs.
10. Praised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon for Your love,
 and bear infirmity and tribulation.
11. Blessed are those who endure in peace
 for by You, Most High, shall they be crowned.
12. Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,
 from whom no one living can escape.
13. Woe to those who die in mortal sin.
 Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will,
 for the second death shall do them no harm.
14. Praise and bless my Lord and give him thanks
 and serve him with great humility.

¹ Translation from *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, New York-London-Manila, 1999, 113-114.

Verses 1 & 2

Most High, all powerful, good Lord,

Yours are the praises, the glory, and the honor, and all blessing.

To You alone, Most High, do they belong,

and no human is worthy to mention Your name.

The central square in Assisi hums with activity. Tourists fill their water bottles at the fountain. Friends gather to share a drink or a meal at one of the many outdoor eateries. Street performers ply their trade to appreciative audiences. To be in this square is to be fully immersed in all of humanity's complexities. While there, one can imagine Francis at home laughing with friends and strangers alike. One can see him noticing the beggars, the lepers as they crouched in the shadows and leaving his companions to embrace them.

Francis was also at home at his hermitage on the top of Mt. Subasio, which towers directly above the town. There he would be at home in a different world; a world of quiet, contemplation. The life here is lush, green and every bit as alive in its gentleness as the town is in its clamor.

Both these worlds formed Francis until the day he died. Loving all people, he was clear about his call to minister especially to the poor, the sick and the vulnerable who moved, too often invisibly, through the crowded streets. Francis saw God as fully incarnate in all of life's joys and sorrows.

Yet he also treasured the time he spent at his hermitage; often making the steep climb there to be alone, to pray, to listen, to contemplate God's glory and infinite power. At the hermitage, Francis was able to gaze down through the valley below and see the full grandeur of God's Creation. The vineyards, forests, rivers and even the towns spoke to him of the God who created everything and everyone in love.

These reflections caused Francis, by the time he wrote The Canticle of the Creatures, to understand humility not as self-loathing but as a deep awareness of God's radical otherness. Unlike humans, God alone is worthy to be praised. God alone is all-powerful and lovingly commands our worship. We come before God not as miserable wretches, but as creatures like any other that God created. Our lives, our petty concerns fade into nothingness when faced with this grandeur, this unconditional love.

Understanding this brought Francis profound joy; allowing him to see God at work in the noise of the town and in his call to fully serve Lady Poverty. This understanding allowed him to see the face of God in everyone he met and to live a life that in its simplicity and joy conveyed the Gospel to all he met. And so it does for us as our Christian journey takes us into a deeper understanding of who God is and who we as creatures are before God.

No human is worthy of God's love. No human is fit in their sinfulness to worship God. And yet God graces us with glimpses of God's glory all around. God invites us in a myriad of ways to praise God's Name as we joyfully serve those around us. More importantly, God calls us to seek him in everything we do and in everyone we meet.

-The Rev. Linda Watkins

Verses 3 & 4

*Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
Who is the day and through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor;
and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.*

Brother Sun provides for all the Creatures of Creation; allowing for the beauty of the entirety of creation to shine in glory. In modernity, we have come to understand the potentiality of power the sun holds. On a molecular level, the Sun (in)directly provides energy for fundamental processes of life. The Sun's bundles of heat, pressure, and energy fuels our livelihoods. However, humanity's constant harvesting, processing, and using energy to provide comfort for sections of society causes deep harm and neglect for the collective. We, as humanity, are called to be stewards; not abusing neglecters of Creation. The real and immediate dangers of climate change: eliminating habitats, causing extinction, and devastating coastal economies and livelihoods, are clear indicators of humanity's unsustainable practices and neglect regarding the Creatures of Creation. A generous reading of this demoralizing historical trend from a Franciscan viewpoint might say humanity is so inspired and awe-filled by the power of the Sun and the beauty it can create that people in power exploited the very nature of the relationship. One of the byproducts of this damaged, unbalanced relationship with the creative powers of the Sun and its light also led to mistreatment and under-compensation of farm laborers. In the United States farm laborers are historically slaves and immigrants. These people frequently viewed as subhuman because of their skin color exemplify the arrogance and ignorance capable of humanity. Once again, we have neglected to heed God's call for stewardship and creation care. This un-thanked invisible labor harms our relationship to food systems and propagates injustice. Labor has value that should be compensated and additionally, in the case of farm labor, providing food for entire communities sustains immeasurable good.

This is where God's call for stewardship of/with/for Creation must be taken seriously. We cannot fully appreciate the radiance and beauty of Brother Sun or God while we harm and violate other Creatures of Creation. Our relationships must have foundations in justice and mutual respect; not neglect and exploitation. We exist in community with each other, with Other Creatures, and with God; we must learn collectively to live as St. Francis with respect and admiration of Brother Sun and The Most High One.

-Steven Simpkins

Verse 5

*Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful.*

The tide-smoothed beach stone you hold in the palm of your hand, the brilliant yellow petals of the common dandelion, the wisdom lines etched on your grandmother's face—all originate in the moon and stars. Carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen in our bodies, in all animals and plants and in Earth itself were created by generations of stars. We now know that Walt Whitman's statement, "...a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars," is true even though it might have seemed fanciful in 1855 when he wrote it in his epic poem, *Leaves of Grass*.

Such journeywork began 4.6 billion years ago when a supernova in our galaxy, the Milky Way, exploded and a new star was born—our sun. As swirling gasses and dust broke off from the sun, planets were created, including Earth and the moon. Our galaxy of the Milky Way we now know is just one of 200 billion galaxies, and it contains 100 billion stars. Discoveries in the 1990s revealed the extent of the observable universe from surveys taken by NASA's Hubble Space Telescope; and we have learned about the chemical composition of life on Earth through comparisons with moon rocks and meteorites.

The ever-moving, ever-expanding celestial tapestry of bright stars, bursting supernovas, spinning planets, shimmering Northern Lights, galaxies beyond galaxies dazzles our imagination. For eons and millennia human beings have read the heavens and marked days and seasons by the movements of the stars. Before the advent of modern navigation, sailors looked to the celestial sphere for direction. Indigenous people held council under the full moon, and farmers and philosophers consulted the stars for guidance. Kings and shepherds followed a bright star to Bethlehem where they beheld the baby who would become the light of the world. What these wise people could not have known was that all human beings, and everything that lives, are all related; all are partners in the one magnificent glorious family of life in the universe.

As the astronomer, Carl Sagan reminded us, "We are a way for the universe to know itself. Some part of our bodies knows this is where we come from. We are star-stuff!" We are the human family intimately related to every human being of every culture, color, tongue and land; we are related to all animals on Earth, birds of the air, fish of the seas, all plants, rocks and rocky mountain ridges; every star, moon, sun and planet in the universe. Back through eras and ages, we are connected to the thread of the supernova where life began 4.6 billion years ago and to life as it continues to unfold in our ever-enlarging universe. There is a phrase in the Lakota language that expresses our oneness with all, [Mitákuye oyás'ín](#), which is to say, all my relations; everyone and everything is related.

As companions in this astounding, magnificent web of life, we have the responsibility and the joy to walk humbly and justly, hand and hand and heart to heart, with all our sisters and brothers and all that lives and moves and breathes.

All praise to you, my Lord, through sun and moon, through all your shining stars and constellations; through all your glittering galaxies and supernovas. “You formed them clear and precious and beautiful.”

-Anne Rowthorn

Anne Rowthorn, “A Reflection on Verse #5, “The Canticle of Creatures,” 2020.
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Verse 6

*Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather,
through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures.*

The Chaotic Winds of The Pandemic

A rehabilitator, Saint Francis spent his years walking in faith treating the ostracizing disease leprosy. He spent his adolescence terrified of the disease, but after meeting an afflicted vagabond, he approached and kissed the man; later realizing that the sickly senior citizen- as was all life around him - was God incarnate. Francis and his followers devoted themselves to treating the dangerous ailment, making substantial work in improving the well-being of their patients. Like the fresh winds of spring, Francis's teachings brought new life to the destitute. This idea is exemplified in Cantic of the Creatures stanza 6, "Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind, and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather, through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures". The air, no matter the time of day nor the earthly condition, is always flowing and bringing new changes with it. These changes provide us a mirror glimpse into the past, with Covid-19 paralleling the isolating power leprosy governed.

With cyclone smashing power, Covid-19 has uprooted and dismantled the preconceived ideas of what a pandemic would look like: less of a fleeting moment and more of long haul. Throughout the states, economic security has been decimated, leaving millions homeless, due in large part to the lack of safety nets and well-paying jobs preceding Covid-19. Twice in this decade we have endured brutal recessions - once thought impossible but occurring with ferocity and with little warning. The economic systems of America - which has repeated the mantra for the past forty years of maximizing shareholder wealth above all else - has ended in disaster for the majority of Americans, making the country all the more vulnerable to viruses like Covid-19. Georgia (my current residence), Florida, and California have continually surpassed the daily death record each week and show little sign of halting. Fear and anger have controlled the narrative of what should be done with the virus as self-centered success has enraptured the minds of the leaders in power. But that seems to be life for America, continuing in the cycles, we see billowing, grey clouds some days, and a searing, bright sun the next.

Life, especially the current state we are in, feels perpetual and stagnant. Like the AIDS virus of the 1980's, the simplest solutions were dismissed, as those in charge felt no pity for the suffering. Similarly, the rise of global poverty, fascism, and totalitarianism not only in the U.S. but in Europe and South America, is almost identical to those occurrences forty years earlier. Amid this crisis, the virus has locked humanity away from one another, a detrimental prospect for predominantly social creatures. The world awaiting us in the near future will no doubt be brutal as the survivors of Covid-19 will be wracked with permanent physical and mental ailments. Without immediate action, the most vulnerable will be compromised.

Meaningful change could occur once Covid-19 is over, but non-partisan support is needed to make it a reality. Ideas such as Medicare for All and the Green New Deal have become accepted ideas by the majority of people in the United States and could blow a healing wind over the scarred and bruised country. Akin to the plagues of leprosy that overran Italy, caring for and providing for those who are and are not afflicted is the only direct way to end the problem at hand. Ignoring the past and its teachings, evident from the last forty years of poverty and oppression, will only leave the world trapped in a never-ending miasma.

-Mick Etchison

Verse 7

*Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.*

SISTER WATER

“Laudato Si, opi Signorenore, per sor Acqua, la quale e multo utile et hmile et Pretiosa et casta”

- (Saint Francis of Assisi Umbrian dialect)

A CONVERSATION

Dianne: Sister Water so precious you are, I turn on the faucet and spend a long time in a hot shower, water is healing my aching muscles, it warms me on a cold day.

Noel: In my village in The Democratic Republic of The Congo the people have to dig deep holes into the ground to find clean water, we drop our buckets into the ground and draw the water for cooking, bathing and drinking. It is very hard work.

John: Here in Centerville, Illinois, we are the poorest city in the United States, a population of a little over 5000, 95% of us are African American. Our water pumps in the sewage system have not been maintained for decades. We flush our toilets and human waste backs up into our yards. My family from other places do not come to visit anymore because it smells like a pig sty.

Dianne: Shower finished, time to put on dinner. I turn on the faucet and fill my pan. We are going to have a nice pasta and vegetables.

Noel: I am a doctor. In our hospitals we do not have a clean water, we have to add alcohol to water to scrub our hands. Babies are given contaminated water to drink. It gives them diarrhea, many become dehydrated and die.

Joe: I am from Kenya, there are pumps in the cities, but only the rich, mostly politicians have clean water.

John: I had to spend \$30,000 repairing my house which has been damaged by raw sewage flooding into my yard, six months later my basement wall collapsed, I cannot afford to move. Countless calls to the County meet with no response. County funding goes to other municipalities with resources. Centerville is the forgotten city.

Dianne: I love lakes, they are places of play and meditation. Sister Water, so chaste. I have seen pictures of the Democratic Republic of The Congo and Kenya and the beautiful lakes. I gaze over the water of Cooper Lake in the Cascades, my grandchildren frolic in the abundant small lakes in the Greater Seattle area. I meditate and I hear you Noel, Joe, Cabral, Virginia, and John. We are all born out of the water of our mother’s wombs, but economic injustice and racism have led us on very different paths.

Dianne says Sister Water is pure and playful, Noel says it is life.

I feel the call of Sister Water to bring justice and access. I was sharing this reflection with staff members of a medical facility. Everybody is ready to help with donating for wells in The Congo and Kenya but not a mention of Centerville. It is quite common to “help” in places that does not give

us much of an opportunity for direct action, direct action in Centerville, Flint and other place in the U.S gets us involved in politics and needing to make hard choices which challenge our comfort levels. Regarding Kenya however, the United States dumps its “recycled” plastic in Kenya. We need to speak out.

Sister Water we were born from you, let us treat you well Sister for you sustain us with life.

-Dianne Aid, TSSF

September 2nd, 2020

*Noel and Joe were interviewed for this reflection, they are both immigrants, and are staff members of a long-term nursing center. John is fictitious but facts given are true based on [an article](#) from [Equity Legal Services](#) in Saint Clair County, Illinois.

Verse 8

*Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
through whom You light the night,
and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.*

A personal reflection by Phina Borgeson

Sitting around the campfire, backs to the cool night, listening safely to scary stories accompanied by the burnt sugar smell of toasted marshmallows.

Gathered with family and friends at the holiday hearth, cheered by dancing flames and good company.

Circled in the darkness as the new fire is kindled, the candle is lit and processed, light is spread through the congregation, and we hear the deacon sing “All you who stand near this marvelous and holy flame, pray with me to God the almighty....”

All images of the power of Brother Fire to comfort, charm and inspire.

In the Spring of 2020 [Interfaith Power and Light](#) promoted James Balog’s film *The Human Element*. Based on the four ancient elements, plus the added fifth, the human one, the film was a stimulus to action on climate change. When the second segment opened with a wildfire scene, I reacted with anxiety, fear, and heavy, sobby breathing. For a few minutes it took great effort to stay focused on the screen and the narration, because the visuals had triggered a visceral memory. Four of the top ten most destructive fires in California have occurred in my deanery during the last five years. In 2017 hundreds of homes in my city were lost. In 2019 I was under mandatory evacuation.

California has been no stranger to fires, but their extent, intensity and frequency in recent years illustrate the impact of a rapidly changing climate. As with other environmental disasters, wildfires hit the poor hardest. When an old mobile home park burnt to the ground, residents became homeless.

When expensive houses were destroyed, owners seeking rental housing drove up prices and displaced low-income tenants.

Agriculture and service workers lost employment.

During the Kincadee fire of 2019, guest workers scheduled to return south or risk deportation could not get to the vineyards where they were employed to pick up the pay needed to travel.

Undocumented residents are not eligible for disaster benefits needed to rebuild their lives, even after years of paying taxes.

All examples of the power of Brother Fire to dislocate, disrupt, and shatter lives, hitting hardest where economic injustice and environmental racism already exist.

As smoke filled the air again in fire season 2020, I found myself singing along with Zoom one Sunday morning to Hymn 636 in *Hymnal 1982*, “How firm a foundation.” Consider verse four.

“When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,

my grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;

the flame shall not hurt thee;

I only design thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.”

Brother fire provides light and warmth, Brother Fire destroys, but Brother Fire also has the capacity to purge and regenerate. Fire in a forest can strengthen and renew a healthy ecosystem. [Craig Anderson of Landpaths](#) recently wrote “We are inspired by the fact that Southern Pomo peoples and other indigenous tribes have long had a culture of burning to regenerate land....How can we learn more and better to apply these time-tested practices”

Recent fire storms have also caused us to examine underlying injustices and refine community life. Communication during disasters has been improved to include Spanish regularly and to increase interpretation of the indigenous languages of guest workers. The emergency food system has been studied by food policy leaders and is undergoing continuous improvement so that the work of big relief organizations, countywide non-profits, and grassroots generosity are better integrated. Organizers from several groups have come together to create [Undocufund in Sonoma County](#), a model for addressing the lack of public assistance, while also advocating for reforms protecting farm workers employed during fire emergencies from environmental hazards. Brother Fire lights the night, and he also shines a light into the dark corners of our practices which fail to respect every human being and all the creatures and processes of creation.

-The Rev Dcn. Phina Borgeson

Verse 9

*Praised by You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,
who sustains and governs us,
and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs.*

The Humans and The Beasts: How Harmony is Needed to Protect the World

Venerated Saint Francis of Assisi is credited with composing the first Italian poem of great significance, *The Canticle of The Creatures*. He is perhaps the first environmental polemicist speaking for the Church. He was known for taking a vow of poverty and having a steadfast belief that the natural world and its creatures were of utmost importance and deserved complete integration into everyday life. He once brokered a deal with a wolf that was terrifying the villagers of Gubbio² ³. He promised to provide for the wolf, and in return the wolf would live peacefully with the Villagers. His pro-cohabitational outlook on life is exemplified in, *The Canticle of The Creatures*. The poetic work has modern implications because of its rumination on environmental and social justice inside Italy. Respect for the environment, and all of God's creatures are exemplified in Stanza 9, "Praised by You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs." In this stanza, the earth is the provider, keeping its denizens nourished and safe. Humanity often ignores the creation, abandons St. Francis' admonitions and instead, we take it for granted, and abuse the resources it provides, leaving only destruction for us and all life.

St. Francis and his philosophy of embracing the natural world, combined with the modern subtext of detaching from the capitalistic systems that have degraded the earth are central themes of *The Canticle of the Creatures*. Francis, founder of the Franciscan Order was steadfast in his belief that the nature of God lies in its creation, our fellow man, and creatures. Succinctly preached by John Paul II in regard to Francis posthumously, urged Christians to not behave like, "...dissident predators where nature is concerned, but to assume responsibility for it, taking all care so that everything stays healthy and integrated, so as to offer a welcoming and friendly environment even to those who succeed us." The Franciscan view of life is one of service; believing that helping others leads to a happy and fulfilling life. His views are strongly shown in the Canticle, describing the family of elements and everyday events coming together to keep the world turning. The stanza, alongside its adjacent lines in the poems, reflect the love that Saint Francis felt towards the natural world.

St. Francis' texts and poems greatly reflect the need to nurture and protect the world around us. Franciscan teaching urges individuals and communal melding to combat unjust systems in place. If humanity does not heed the warnings of science and nature, it will guarantee the downfall of society and the deaths of so many blameless people.

As the stanza and teachings infer, the earth is mankind's sole benefactor for daily living, disregarding the respect it rightfully deserves is the ultimate folly and could lead to mankind's

² [The story of the Wolf of Gubbio can be found here](#)

³ [Artwork inspired by the story done by Sassetta circa 1437](#)

destruction. For the two million years humanity in some form has existed on the planet, it has been solely nurtured by the earth's bountiful gifts, while humankind is tasked with sustaining the planet in return. But to those in power, the plundering and erasure of God's fertile soil seems to be preferable. Like the Wolf of Gubbio, a deal must be struck, or the menace continues, and without human compromise, our planet could become inhabitable. A concept antithetical to Saint Francis's teachings. Francis pleads with us to protect the creation, to mingle freely with nature instead of ignoring and destroying it.

-Mick Etchison

Verses 10 & 11

*Praised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon for Your love,
and bear infirmity and tribulation.*

*Blessed are those who endure in peace
for by You, Most High, shall they be crowned.*

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. – Romans 8.22

We live in unprecedented times. A global pandemic, a reckoning with racial injustice, signs everywhere of the looming climate disaster, extreme polarization in our politics, an election coming in which drastically different visions of our country are being laid out, while at the same time our basic democratic institutions are under threat. Any kind of vision of reconciliation, of pardon, of peace with justice, seems so remote. In the face of massive concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few, the idealistic visions of Jesus, “The meek shall inherit the earth... The last shall be first and the first shall be last.” seem to have no basis. We seem to be on a planet spinning out of control.

And yet, there is, as TS Eliot says, “a still point of the turning world.” Is it possible to find that still point still? Can we be silent? Can we be still, amid all that is going on, and catch a glimpse of this point, this center around which the world turns?

We do stand at a threshold. We are always standing at a threshold. A gateway, just as St. Francis stood at the gate of Assisi, in that moment, leaving behind his earthly father’s world to embrace a new vision of the community of creation. At this threshold we catch a glimpse of the world, not as an endless battle of opposites pitted against each other. Instead, we see an eternal dance in which all the diversity of creation is united. Creation does go round and round and yet there is somewhere, deep down at the core, at the center, a point, a singularity around which everything revolves. A still point of the turning world to which we are called to return.

Scientists say at the center of our galaxy is a black hole. A singularity around which everything rotates, held in this motion by its gravitational pull. This mystery, a dark night from which no light can escape, a reality beyond what any of us can comprehend, nevertheless has us within its sphere of influence. It holds all things in place. We live our lives on the event horizon of a black hole, this liminal space that threatens at once to engulf us and everything into nothingness, while at the same time holding all things together.

Black holes are a fundamental reality of creation. Francis may not have known the science of black holes, but nevertheless he had an awareness of this liminal space in which infirmity and tribulation can at once threaten to destroy us, and at the same time can lead us to new birth, to peace, and to the crown that awaits us in the mystery of the Most High, or the Deepest Center. Along with the

more idyllic visions of creation, therefore, black holes have a central place in creation and in creation spirituality.

And there is more. Quantum physics theorizes micro black holes everywhere instantaneously popping in and out of existence. Then there is dark matter and dark energy. Over 95% of the universe is dark matter and dark energy pulling and pushing on the little bit we can see resulting in the expanding universe. What we know and can see are like lights of a city in the night. We are unable to see any of the structures that are obscured by the darkness. But it is this darkness that is the very structure of the universe, that holds everything together and keeps everything in motion.

Can we come to embrace the darkness all around us, that which hold everything together, and keeps everything moving? Can we embrace the mystery, like the black hole at the center of our galaxy, which is the still point of the turning world? Are we willing to risk moving into the liminal space of the event horizon, that quite possibly will be the death of us, to give birth to a new creation? Can we endure to reveal the deep truth of God's creation, that we are all one?

As Francis repeatedly said, "Brothers and Sisters, let us begin!"

-The Rev. David Hacker

Verses 12 & 13

*Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no one living can escape.*

Woe to those who die in mortal sin.

*Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will,
for the second death shall do them no harm.*

These two verses Francis added to the Canticle of the Creatures not long before his death. He knew he was dying and even in his dying Francis was teaching his companions, whom he loved, to praise their Lord Jesus Christ even through Death. Francis was facing his death by celebrating it in the same way as Brother Sun and Sister Moon and all the other elements of creation celebrate and praise the Lord in the very essence of their being.

The image is striking: Sister Death. Not the Grim Reaper, not the one who comes uninvited and takes away life, not the image of the plague, or of the pandemic, but as sister, personified, someone with whom Francis had had a long relationship. He knew, as much as the Apostle Paul knew, that dying was a daily process, a relinquishing, a letting go. As Francis bore in his body the wounds of the Crucified Christ, so Francis sought to be conformed inwardly to the image of Christ, who said with full self-abandonment, “not my will but yours be done.” And now it was our Sister Bodily Death who would assist Francis to take the last steps of this spiritual conversion and to let go of the remnants of a body still persisting in heartbeat and breath.

To walk into the embrace of Sister Death was a triumph of celebration for Francis. To struggle to flee from her reveals fear and a tight grip on what I would perceive is mine, my possession, my right, to be fought for against all who would threaten it. And this is mortal sin, because no one can escape this death. That is why it is a good idea to develop the habit of the nighttime prayer as head is laid to pillow, “Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.”

For those who learn this lesson of seeing in Sister Bodily Death the natural door to the reward of relinquishing all, the rationale, the motivation, and the inner strength to serve justice for the sake of all living beings will bear much fruit.

The Rev. Beverly Hosea, TSSF

Verse 14

*Praise and bless my Lord and give him thanks
and serve him with great humility.*

Francis's multifaceted expression of praise that recognizes God's beneficence throughout creation ends the only place it could, in praising, blessing, and thanking Christ himself. Humble service is then the only active response that can ever be enough, while at the same time being never enough.

It is in a spirit of humble service that we have offered our reflections on the Canticle. These days real concerns press in on every side, threatening to overwhelm us. Speaking of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on Black Americans, the Rev. Dr. Ray Hammond, pastor of Bethel AME Church, a mostly Black congregation in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, said "I often call it the trifecta of trauma, or the health, wealth and stealth crisis....The worst pandemic in 100 years, the worst unemployment in 80 years, and the worst social protests in 60 years all [colliding] in the second quarter of one year."⁴

[Pie Ranch](#) in Pescadero, California, noted on their Facebook page in August the destruction by fire on their farm, including loss of water tanks and their historic farmhouse. They mourned with their neighbors, "and for all suffering during this great reckoning with the intersections of climate change, racial injustice, a global health crisis, and greed...."

We don't know much yet about the novel coronavirus causing the current pandemic. And while we understand many of the historical factors contributing to systemic racism, and the basic science of climate change, there is plenty that we do not know about how to effectively and swiftly right wrongs and change direction. It seems at times like these that our greatest need for humility is in the practice of humble inquiry, in identifying what we do not know, in realizing that much of the time we do not know what we do not know, and in listening to voices we have ignored. All of this is part of the continuing work of reflection, of preparation for action, and of openness to further praise, blessing and thanksgiving.

-The Rev. Dcn. Phina Borgeson

⁴ Pan, Deanna "Black Americans, suffering disproportionately from COVID-19, face a mounting mental health crisis *Boston Globe*, 7 Sep. 2020, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/09/07/metro/black-americans-suffering-disproportionately-covid-19-face-mounting-mental-health-crisis/>