



*The Challenge of Saint Francis*

October 3, 2021: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Nineteenth Sunday after

Pentecost and Saint Francis Day

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment, Rector

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

*Oh God, take our minds and think through them; take our mouths and speak through them; take our hearts, and set them on fire. Amen.*

Perhaps some of you saw the Ken Burns documentary on Muhammed Ali a few weeks ago. I didn't have the good fortune to see all of it, but the portion I did see was riveting.

One of my takeaways was that it is easy to forget that while at the end of his life Ali was almost universally loved and acclaimed, during key portions of his life, Ali was controversial and reviled by millions. This sensational athlete threatened white America with his friendship with Malcolm X, his conversion to the Nation of Islam, his refusal to be drafted into the army, and his vocal opposition to the Vietnam War. After his retirement, however, he became an ambassador for peace and goodwill, and was active promoting orthodox Islam and philanthropy. Who can forget the outpouring of goodwill accompanying his lighting of the Olympic flame in Atlanta in 1996, as he clearly struggled with Parkinson's disease?

We can say the same about the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. For most of his years in active ministry, he was a marked man, and at the height his activism before his assassination and millions despised him in including the director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover. His radical message of justice and love for the poor and stance against the Vietnam War was not universally embraced. This truth is obscured by the fact that there is now a national holiday in his honor, countless parks, streets and monuments named after him, innumerable programs in schools, colleges, and businesses invoking his legacy, and even place on the Episcopal Church's Calendar of Saints (April 4).

And of course, Jesus himself has suffered something of the same fate. Although we acknowledge his execution on the cross every Sunday in our worship, and we are aware of the controversy he stirred up during his lifetime if we pay attention to the Gospel accounts, it is another thing to *actually live* the radical teachings that he led to his death and resurrection. Often, we live lives following a domesticated Jesus.

Today we remember Francis, who has been domesticated as well. We remember him in part because his feast day is tomorrow, but also because it grows clearer every day that our planet- Mother Earth to Francis—is very sick and needs our care.

You'll notice that Pam and Charles have selected beautiful musical offerings that lift up creation themes. The readings from the lectionary appointed for this day may be less obviously connected to Francis, but connected they are. They recapture some of the edginess of Francis, whose full legacy is often lost in a fog of sentimental feeling that is more comfortable than engaging the mixture of compassion—for the poor and all creation—and challenge—to complacency and privilege—that Francis lived out in his own life.



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The passage from Job comes from God's response to the laments of Job and his friends, who for the 38 previous chapters, have questioned why so many horrible things had happened to such an honorable man who refused to renounce his faith in God.

In this small section of God's response out of the whirlwind to Job, God references God's unfathomable power to create the fantastic variety of birds and beasts, some useful, some not. With just a bit of sarcasm, God is saying to Job—"Can you make any of this? Who do you think you are? It's not all about you. The world wasn't created just for humans." God speaks to us as well.

Francis understood our place in the web of the cosmos. Shortly before his death 1126, Francis wrote what is likely the first poem written in Italian: The Canticle of Sun. He celebrates in this poem our kinship with God's creation: Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water, Brother Fire, Mother Earth, and finally, Sister Death. Francis grasped our interconnectedness with all creation, that it wasn't ultimately just about human beings, but about all that God had created.

The psalm captures the radical trust of the Psalmist in the presence, protection, and provision of God. Francis lived into this reality. You may be familiar with the story of Francis renouncing his inheritance in dramatic fashion, by publicly stripping naked before his wealthy father in the Assisi town square. The growing sense that he could trust his heavenly father more than his earthly one may have come in the experience of war between his hometown of Assisi and the town of Perugia. He ended up spending *a year* in a dank, rat-infested jail cell, before his father paid the ransom to free him.

Francis lived out the topsy-turvy values of the Gospel. His holy foolishness—his rejection of worldly wisdom, power, and material things; his whole-hearted embrace of the weak and the poor; the way his life and ministry made the burden lighter for all those he served—is captured by the Gospel reading today. He would have understood the challenges of working against the practices of exploitative capitalism with the God's subversive wisdom which seeks new ways of powering our society, protecting God's creation, and ensuring that all persons have a chance to make a decent living.

Francis' love for the created order meshes with the urgency of our own age to pay attention to how we are contributing to the rising fever of our planet—if the raging fires, intensifying weather events, melting glaciers and ice sheets, rising sea levels, and wildly fluctuating climate conditions aren't enough.

On this fall day in New England, we can join Francis in giving heartfelt thanks for the natural beauty of the world that God has given into our care. At Christ Church we give thanks for our array of solar panels - which, thanks to Brother Sun—not only save us thousands of dollars in electricity, but also reduce our carbon footprint. We have a smart thermostat in the Upper Parish Hall and use cleaner burning natural gas to heat our physical plant. We are doing our part to live out the promise in our Baptismal Covenant: "Will you cherish the wondrous works of God, and protect the beauty and integrity of all creation?"



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And our response is, “I will, with God’s help.” I pray that we continue to live even more fully into this promise.

At Christ Church, we love our neighbors experiencing homelessness through our MANNA feeding program. We give financially to many organizations who work with the poor and marginalized through our Community Concerns Committee. Each summer we take our turn feeding the campers and counselors at B-Safe in Boston, and our Vestry has just recommitted to supporting our siblings at St. Luc’s in Haiti to feed hungry. We are doing our part to live into the part of the Baptismal Covenant that also asks: Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

I pray that with Francis as our companion, witness, and inspiration, we continue to faithfully live into these commitments, and more, with God’s help.

**Amen.**