

2025 St Francis

Someone asked me the other day why we do this Season of Creation thing in the fall. “Wouldn’t it make more sense in the spring?” she asked. “You know, when everything is coming into new life?”

I considered all the possible answers:

Season of Creation is intended to make us more aware of how fragile the climate is, so maybe it’s better to observe it as things are dying off and going into hibernation...

Season of Creation is a great way to begin a new program year, which coincides with the start of school...

Spring is the time of Lent and Easter, our “high holy days,” so we don’t want to bump up against that...

Maybe it’s a throwback to our Jewish roots, in which the new year is celebrated in the fall...

But ultimately I landed on this: the framers of this season wanted to link it to the patron saint of environmental causes, St. Francis of Assisi, and it makes more sense to wrap the season up on his feast day than to try to start it off. (It also helps that another pro-

creation care saints, Hildegard of Bingen, is remembered on September 17.)

Whatever the reasons, I hope that at some point in the past month, something you've heard in church or read in *Keeping the Faith* or the Province I Prayers for Creation series has prompted you to stop for a minute and ask yourself, how can I express my gratitude to God for the beauty of creation? How can I be a better steward of this planet, for myself and for those who come after me?

My sister, Sherry, used to call me a closet Pagan because my spirituality was deeply tied to nature. I would always argue that the Christian tradition is so much deeper and broader than what most American Protestants know. There is a long tradition of Christian mystics who experience the power and presence of God through nature. We're not saying that the trees and the rivers, the mountains and the seas *are* God. Just that we learn something about who God is and what God desires by looking to nature, what some people consider God's testament without words.

This brings us back to Francis. Patty often reminds us of the quotation attributed to him, "Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." I sometimes push back because I think we sometimes let ourselves off the hook a little quickly that way. We don't learn

how to proclaim the Gospel with words, we don't learn how to express our faith verbally. And this is a time when we need to know how to speak up, speak against some of the perversions of the Gospel message.

Francis is not just that nice man standing in the back of our gardens with a bird on his shoulder. Francis was a vocal critic of the ways in which people were misusing the power of the Church to further their own ends.

Francis was born into a wealthy family. He could have moved through this world easily. Never inconvenienced. Never suffering. He had moments of questioning the injustice around him, he even enlisted in the army and lived for a year as a prisoner of war.

But eventually it wasn't enough. He couldn't shut his eyes and ears and heart to the suffering around him. He had mystic visions which challenged him to give up everything and follow Christ as a beggar.

Eventually his message drew enough people to join him on that path that he founded a monastic order based on a rule of life he developed. It was harshly ascetic and demanding.

And it was not the life of a hermit.

That's what has really resonated with me this year, as I've considered what to say about this complicated man. He did not withdraw from the world around him.

He dived headlong into it. He did go on retreat regularly, yes. He went off to the mountains to pray and ponder what God was calling him to. But his ministry was rooted in the cities. He knew nothing changes if the people with the Gospel just keep withdrawing from the chaos.

He confronted it. Not violently—his experience as a soldier had turned him into a man of peace. But Francis was not just the nice, gentle man who loved animals, sang songs to the sun and moon, and invented the Nativity scene. He did seem to love to stir things up. Tradition tells us that in a time when the average person avoided any contact with lepers, Francis would go up to them and kiss them—because he believed in the power of God's love to make us whole.

During the fifth crusade, he defied the battle lines drawn by those of his own Christian faith, and went to the Sultan of Egypt. We know very little of what happened there, other than later sources that say he preached the Gospel to the Muslims (by both word and example) and was allowed to return to the Christian encampment unharmed.

Francis was not...I was about to say he was not afraid to face the chaos. But maybe he was. Maybe he stepped into every encounter with his knees shaking and his heart pounding.

And he did it anyway. Because he followed Jesus wherever Jesus led him.

That is what Francis is teaching me this year. That we need to step forward, proclaim the Gospel, even when our voice shakes. We need to stand in witness to the Love of God, the power of Christ's Resurrection, in the face of those who would happily nail us to the cross or bury us deep. We need to believe in the power of the Holy Spirit to make all things new. AND to do what we can to cooperate with that redeeming, transforming, restorative love of Jesus Christ that assures us that death and destruction never—NEVER—get the last word.

Tradition tells us that in his later years, Francis received the stigmata, marks of the wounds of Christ on the cross in his hands, feet and side. I've always wrestled with this part of the story. I have come to see it more as metaphor. He knew in his own body and soul the depths of the pain and sorrow Jesus experienced. He allowed God to incorporate the woundedness of human life into his witness to the power of God's love and redemption—for *all* creation.

So remember Francis as a mystic, a man of peace, a man who loved animals and nature. But remember him also as a man with the courage to look chaos in the face and not turn away.

A man who sought to live by those words we heard in today's first reading from Micah:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you but
to do justice,
and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Amen.