

## ST. FRANCIS AND THE DOVE

(08/08/2021)

Scripture Lesson: Psalm 24

Luke 17:20-21

The Gospel of Thomas (77) (Robert Funk translation in *The Five Gospels*)

*Jesus said, "I am the light that is over all things. I am all: from me all came forth, and to me all attained. Split a piece of wood; I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there."*

Ok. I finally figured it out! How to get you to not only keep coming back to church, but also to listen to my sermons! It only took me fifty-two years since my ordination in 1969 to figure this out, but, as you know, I don't rush into things.

Last week, if you were here in church and were actually listening to my communion meditation, or if you were at home reading my meditation on your cell phone or iPad or computer this past week, you might recall that I briefly referenced Francis of Assisi, my patron saint, as an example of a mystic who dissolved the boundary between what is called "the two worlds," between earth and heaven, between us and God, and between us and God's creation. Francis, like the German mystic Meister Eckhart (whom I also love), saw the entire universe as alive, as "filled with the glory of God." This is because Eckhart and Francis believed that God not only created the universe; *God lives in and through the universe*. This means that human beings, little animals, birds, and even rocks are incarnations of God!

Part way through my comments on St. Francis, as a casual aside, I said, "Remind me to tell you some time about an experience I had which illustrates the special relationship that Francis had with the animals, an experience that my family and I had when we were exploring the underground section of the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi in Assisi, Italy."

As I understand it, the Basilica is not the location San Damiano, the chapel that Francis and his friends rebuilt following Francis' dream or vision in which God told him, "Rebuild my church." San Damiano was turned into a monastery where Francis' dear friend, Clare, lived. The larger Franciscan monastery is up the hill in the olive groves just outside the town of Assisi. The basilica is the big tourist-attraction shrine downtown. It is so opulent, so enveloped by booths selling St. Francis coffee mugs, St. Francis clickie ball point pens, and St. Francis bobble-head dolls for car dashboards, that Francis, whose life exemplified a vow of poverty, would be horrified. But that's not the point.

This past week, two people who attended church last Sunday (approximately 10% of those in attendance), saw fit to remind me. They wanted me to tell them what happened. Then two people who read my reflection online emailed me to remind me to talk/write about my experience sooner rather than later. This made a total of four people who wanted to hear about my experience, which is probably not a lot in the whole scope of things, although it is 2/3 of the number of players on an ice hockey team, 100% of the number of players on a professional curling team, and 200% of the number of players on a professional cornhole team, but it was

enough for me to experience it as a mandate. I also realized that this is all I need to do from now on—tell you to “remind” me of what I already intend to preach about next week, so that, responding to “popular demand,” I can say what I intended to say all along. Pretty clever, huh?

My family and I visited Assisi in the summer of 1987, following a year living in southern Germany while I studied at the C. G. Jung Institute of Analytical Psychology in Zurich, Switzerland. During my winter break, we drove up through Denmark, went halfway up Norway, and then cut across to Upsala, Sweden. We spent Christmas in Stockholm. The following summer, just before we returned to the States, we drove down through the Italian section of Switzerland and explored northern Italy as far down as Rome. I know what you’re probably thinking: why did we go north in the winter and south in the summer? And you would be correct; I hadn’t thought it through very well! But that’s not the point.

While we were in Assisi, which I love, and which I have visited on several other occasions, we visited the basilica. Underneath the nave of the church is a series of corridors. Alongside the corridors are simple, spartan little rooms that may or may not have been where monks resided. One of these is purportedly where Francis lived. When we were there, I decided to suspend disbelief and look at these little cells as the actual place where Francis and the early Franciscans lived.

In Francis’ room, there was a life-sized statue of him facing toward the corridor. I believe it was made of wood, though I am not sure about this. Anyway, as we stood outside the roped-off room and looked in, a pure white dove flew down the corridor, entered the room, and perched on Francis’ left shoulder.

I was astounded! The corridor was lengthy. If memory serves me, it was probably 40-50 feet long. Why would that dove navigate the corridor, pass by the other rooms, and take up temporary residence on Francis’ shoulder? Did the present-day monks train a couple of white doves to do this for the edification of tourists or pilgrims? (BTW, in Assisi we thought of ourselves as pilgrims, not tourists; in Florence, Venice, and Rome we were definitely tourists). Can you really train a bird to do this? Or was the bird drawn in some strange way to that statue? Did that statue, that likeness of the patron saint of animals, give off a certain energy that drew the bird to it? I couldn’t understand what I was seeing; I couldn’t explain it; but it struck me as meaningful. It struck me as a kind of religious experience.

Then I noticed that a young woman about my age (I was younger in 1987) who was standing next to us burst into tears. I asked her if she were ok. Through her tears she explained to us that her father had fought in the European theater in WWII. After the war, he was stationed in Italy for a couple of years to help them with the rebuilding. While he was there, he visited Assisi, visited this basilica, and, under the main building, had witnessed two pure white doves fly down the corridor to perch on Francis’ shoulders.

When he returned home, he told his daughter, the woman standing next to us, what he had seen. The young woman said that she laughed at him, told him that was stupid, that it could

not have happened. Now, standing here, she witnessed exactly what her father had experienced. Unfortunately, she couldn't tell him that she had been wrong, and he had been right; he had died the previous year.

This is a true story. Darlene remembers it. The problem is, how can we explain it? How could two doves, generation after generation both in dove lives (2-8 years) and human lives (75 years), continue this daily pilgrimage to the replica of the saint who tamed the wolf that was terrorizing the people of the nearby town of Gubbio? I couldn't believe that the monks who were the custodians of the basilica trained a couple of doves to do this generation after generation just to impress gullible tourists. I think that in some way, these little birds sensed the spirit of this great man and were drawn to him. I think, as I mentioned last week, that these birds dissolved the imaginary boundary between the "two worlds," the worlds of God and creation, the realm of spirit or psyche and matter. These little doves help us to see differently.

By the way, in response to the question "Who, in human history, do you think was most like Jesus?" generation after generation of respondents from many different religious traditions have answered, "Francis of Assisi."

I like the way of seeing, the way of thinking, the way of understanding God's relationship to creation that was articulated by Meister Eckhart and Francis of Assisi. I find it preferable to the other two options. The first option denies that there is a spiritual dimension to life and to creation; it sees creation as basically dead lifeless matter that somehow, accidentally gave rise to various forms of life. In this way of thinking, there is no creator, no intelligent design behind the billion-year process of evolution on earth.

My problem with this option is that, according to the testimony of several mathematicians including Karl Abraham, whom I heard at a conference, there is no way that random genetic mutations and the survival of the fittest could have produced the extremely complex human beings that we are in the 14.5 billion years that have elapsed since the Big Bang. Statistically speaking, this is simply not enough time. There had to be some other factor influencing or guiding the process. Second, I just don't like this way of looking at the universe. Third, that's not the way that I experience it.

The second way of seeing the universe pictures God as a giant watchmaker. In this analogy, God is the watchmaker, and the universe is the watch. I believe the astronomer Johannes Kepler held this view, but I am not sure about this. Drawing from Thomas Aquinas's so-called "proofs" for the existence of God, which asserted that just as a house logically implies a housebuilder, a ship logically implies a shipbuilder, so also a universe logically implies a universe builder or creator, and we can call this creator "God."

Kepler (I believe it was Kepler), using the metaphor of a watch, suggested that God created this extremely intricate watch that we call the universe, wound it up, and then is letting it run down to the end. The problem with this way of picturing God and creation, from my point of view, is that God is totally separate from creation. To be sure, we can learn something about the

way a watchmaker thinks by closely examining the watch she/he made, especially if it is a Swiss watch, but the watchmaker does not live in and through the watch.

Another problem, at least as I see it, is that, according to this analogy, everything is going to come to an end someday, probably not within our lifetime, but someday. Our sun will burn out; all the suns will burn out; and the universe will become lifeless, dark, and very, very cold (if “cold” and “dark” mean anything in a post-apocalyptic time—and if “time” means anything as well). I’m sorry, but I just don’t like this option either.

There is a third way of thinking about God and creation, about God and us. This is called panentheism. If pantheism is Kepler’s belief that we can learn about God by exploring God’s creation, then panentheism is Meister Eckhart’s. According to panentheism, God lives in and through creation. God lives in and through us. I think this is what Jesus meant when, as recorded in John 10, he echoed the words of the writer of the 82<sup>nd</sup> psalm when he told his followers, “You are gods,” and when he told us that inasmuch as we do it to one of the least of God’s little creatures, we do it to him.

In this view, the universe is shot through with divinity! Everything, everyone is sacred! Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote,

*Earth’s crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God:  
But only those who see take off their shoes.*

This may be a new insight to me, and perhaps to you, but it is not a new insight. The Zen master Shunryu Suzuki said, “The world is its own magic.” The Dutch pantheistic philosopher Spinoza said, “The more we understand individual things, the more we understand God.” The English poet and Jesuit Priest Gerard Manley Hopkins said, “The world is charged with the splendor of God.”

As I mentioned last week, wouldn’t it be great if we could see the world like this? If we could see little animals as shot through with divinity? If we could come to love trees, streams, even rocks? If we could see all human beings this way—even those who are different from us? Then, finally, which is often the most difficult thing for us to do, if we could see *ourselves* this way—as “charged with the splendor of God?”

I hope we never become so hardened by life, by the struggles of our life, that we no longer see both the mystery and the magic behind two little white doves, generation after generation, somehow finding their way to this simple wooden statue and wanting to spend some time with it every day. Despite the darkness that, at times, seems to envelop our world, I hope we never lose sight of the way the psalmist, who, by the way, may have been in captivity in Babylonia, saw this world. In the 24<sup>th</sup> psalm, he wrote:

*The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it,  
the world and those who live in it;*

And in psalm 19:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. . .*

And, as recorded in the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus said:

*Lift the stone and you will find me;  
cleave the wood, and I am there.*

It is this sense of the presence of the Spirit of God underlying and connecting everything that makes intercessory prayer possible. It is the sense that, as incarnations of God, we are one with God and, in a very deep and potentially healing way, with each other. Remind me to say more about the way intercessory prayer works later.

I don't understand what I saw, what I experienced in the summer of 1987 beneath the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi. Then again, I don't need to understand it. I just need to believe that things like this happen, that they happen more often than we realize, and that they bring both a healing power and an enlightened way of seeing the world, other people, and also an enlightened way of seeing ourselves, a way of seeing that can bring a healing that passes all understanding.

By the way, remind me to tell you some time about how the wilderness experience, as described in the Bible, can provide us with resources for our journey through the wilderness we are currently experiencing as individuals, a nation, and a world. Just saying . . .

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
[www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com)  
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