

Grace and peace to you.

This morning, our texts offer us quite the contrast! In our Hebrew Scripture story, Moses has just about had it with the grumpy, hangry Israelites who seem ready to give up their freedom, autonomy, and identity as God’s people in exchange for the pleasures of fresh vegetables and meat. They face challenges, and all they see is scarcity and sacrifice. In our Gospel passage from Luke, Jesus has been sparring with his religious opponents and preaching against greed. He now urges his followers to consider how God cares for Creation, and to take heart that God will provide enough for our needs. Knowing the challenging path to come, Jesus preaches abundance.

This tension might help us to remember to look for the tension within each passage as well: Jesus points us away from *greed* and showing off material possessions, yet also recognizes our *basic need* for food, clothing, and shelter – he does not suggest that we go completely without! Moses’ *frustration* turns to *rejoicing* as other, even scandalous, leaders rise up! But what does that have to do with the Season of Creation? Remembering St. Francis and the lessons he can teach us is a helpful lens. Perhaps he was a bit like Eldad and Medad, scandalously prophesying in the middle of the Israelite camp. Francis did not follow the conventions of his day, but had his own moments of the Holy Spirit descending upon him, convicting him: “Jesus told us to love and care for the least, shouldn’t I care for the leper (as in the story I shared during the Children’s Message), the birds and the earth itself?” He famously preached to the birds, talked a dangerous wolf into a compromise with the town of Gubbio, and took a vow of poverty, living solely on the generosity of strangers and trusting himself to God’s abundance through them.

Our theme word today is “Bless,” and thinking about Francis, a scandalous believer in God’s abundance and the goodness of God’s creation, makes me wonder what we mean by “bless.” How often do we say things like, “Count your blessings,” referring to material and non-material things as gifts? We also bless, or pray for God’s favor upon people as they travel or prepare for medical procedures, and upon bikes and backpacks and quilts. And we bless God. Several of the Psalms especially, state that we bless the LORD, or that we bless God’s name. But WHAT does THAT mean!? In this case, “bless” means to worship, glorify, and praise. Maybe this is what we are getting at when in gratitude or rejoicing we say, “Oh, bless you!” (With the parallel, sarcastic Southern insult, “Well, bless your heart.”) This morning, we recited The Canticle of Brother Sun and Sister Moon, attributed to St. Francis, which is exactly this type of blessing: “Praise be You, my

Lord...” through so many facets of Creation, each a close relation to us: brothers and sisters in our shared cosmos.

Which makes me wonder, to follow up with Sandy’s sermon last week on the greatest and least, where do we see ourselves within God’s Creation? At the top of the food chain, holding dominance over the rest? Or within a wide community, different yet equal – brothers and sisters – with the rest of God’s Creation, from our animal companions, to the plants and animals we eat, to the earth, itself: the soil, rocks, water, and air. Giving the special responsibility to steward and care for Creation.

How do we bless Creation? Creation is certainly a blessing to us! But, how do we pray for God’s favor upon Creation? How do we praise Creation? How do we offer gifts to Creation? Each week, during the prayers of intercession, also called the prayers of the people, as the Assisting Minister prays out loud on behalf of us all (and we affirm each prayer petition with our response: Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**), we pray for the well-being of creation: We BLESS creation.

On Thursday mornings, a few of us have met at J.Neils Park to sing and pray, walk and reflect on scripture outside, in creation. Perhaps this is one way to pray and praise God alongside creation, it may even be a way to praise creation itself. This last week, Thursday was our day without power, and everything was topsy-turvy: no School, no daycare, no grocery stores, no gas pumps, limited phone and email access. Piper and Lazarus joined Amy and I for our walk and what a gift to see the walking trail through their eyes. Rocks, sticks, branches, stumps, trees, flowers, dirt were all gifts to marvel at and enjoy, to climb and lift and carry and treasure. One favorite was a dead, decaying stump with pine tree sapling growing up from the middle. Lazarus and Piper took turns climbing into the stump to be alongside the small, persistent, young tree reaching for the sun. They rejoiced in, enjoyed and praised, they BLESSED creation.

But I’m a little stumped (no pun intended) at to how be a gift to creation. Especially in the wake of storms like Hurricane Helene which has left a path of death and destruction across the Southeast, damaging homes, businesses and lives even far inland. What is our human effect and responsibility for these super storms? Can we heal our relationship with nature, and can we help natural systems heal in order to live more harmoniously? As we pray and BLESS creation alongside those harmed by natural disasters, what are we prompted to do in response to our prayerful encounter with God? Responses which welcome, accept, serve, witness to not only our human neighbors but to Creation itself? May we be blessed, in order to bless our Creator God, and the whole of God’s Creation. Amen.