

October 5, 2025

Learning to See

Lam. 1:1-6, 3:19-26; Ps. 137: 1-9; Feast of St. Francis of Assisi

I begin with a poem written by a poet named Daniel Ladinsky that was inspired by St. Francis of Assisi and his love for the created world.

*I once spoke to my friend, an old squirrel, about the Sacraments—  
He got so excited  
And ran into a hollow in his tree and came  
Back holding some acorns, an owl feather,  
And a ribbon he had found.  
And I just smiled and said, 'Yes, dear,  
You understand:  
Everything imparts  
His grace*

I open with this because yesterday, October 4, was the Feast day of St. Francis and as I was preparing for this sermon, reading the lectionary passages, I kept returning to some of the themes of St. Francis' life.

His is a fascinating story: born into relative wealth in Assisi in Italy, he spent time as a soldier and a prisoner of war and eventually chose to renounce his wealth and commit to walking in the ways of Jesus, which for him meant living in poverty and simplicity, serving the poor and least of these. Over time, others were attracted to his way of life and began following and living with him and he became the founder of the Franciscan Order within the Catholic Church.

This poem was inspired by St. Francis because part of Francis' way of life included a deep respect and love for the created world. In fact, he is considered the patron saint of the environment and animals because of the respect he gave to creation. There was a powerful group in his day, the Cathars, that saw the material world as sinful, evil, and something to escape. This same separation of the so-called 'spiritual' from the physical is often present today as well. In opposition to this, Francis lived and proclaimed a more holistic faith that valued creation.

St. Francis, and many others throughout history, saw the created world not as evil, but as sacramental. A sacrament is something considered to be a channel of divine grace. It's been described as "**a physical encounter or event in which you experience the transcendent, or grace, or the holy.**" (Richard Rohr, *The Franciscan Way*). The created world as sacramental means creation reveals to us, speaks to us, of God and their grace and love and even imparts grace to us. As the poem states, "Everything imparts His grace."

Within Scripture we see this sentiment notably in Romans 1:20 "**For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been**

**clearly seen, being understood from what has been made”** God is revealed through the created world. Creator revealed through creation. Richard Rohr often refers to the created, natural world as the ‘First Bible’. By this he means that creation was/is the first revelation of God that we have. Now, we know God does not stop there and has chosen to reveal Themselves in other ways, such as through Scripture, and most fully in Jesus the Christ who is described as **“the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being”** in Hebrews 1. But the created world can, if we approach it as such, reveal God to us and draw us to God.

St. Francis’ first biographer, Thomas of Celano, wrote, **“St. Francis praised the Artist in every one of the Artist’s works; whatever he found in things made, he referred to their Maker. He rejoiced in all the works of God’s hands, and with joyful vision saw into the reason and cause that gave them life. In beautiful things he came to know Beauty itself. To him all things were good. They cried out to him, ‘The one who made us is infinitely good.’ By tracing God’s footsteps in things, St. Francis was following God wherever God led. Francis made from created things a ladder to God’s throne.”** (as quoted in Murray Bodo, St. Francis of Assisi: The Practical Mystic).

I find this to be a beautiful vision. He rejoiced in all the works of God’s hand. Looking deeply he saw their reason and cause. In contemplating the beauty of creation, he came to know Beauty itself. Creation taught him **“The one who made us is infinitely good.”**

Creation can reveal God and God’s goodness to us. But I believe it goes beyond this as well. Looking deeply at the natural world can also provide us with a lens through which to see the inherent worth and value of each aspect of the world and our interconnection with each aspect which, if we allow it to, can radically transform how we approach and treat every other person and part of creation.

There is a medieval concept or metaphor called The Great Chain of Being that was used as a way to describe that the entire world is connected. This chain of being included the Creator, spirit realm, humanity, animals, plants, earth. Now, originally it was very hierarchical and patriarchal, but is easily modified to remain useful to us today and Richard Rohr is one who has taken this concept and modified it in light of Jesus. He states, **“In themselves and in their union together the links proclaim the glory of God and the inherent dignity of all things.”** (Rohr, 11/13/2016).

Another Saint, St. Bonaventure, who wrote of St. Francis and his life and theology, stated, **“when [St. Francis] considered the primordial source of all things, he was filled with abundant piety, calling creatures, no matter how small, by the name of brother and sister, because he knew that they had the same source as himself.”** (Cunningham, p. 95). Every link in the chain connected, important, all coming forth from the same Divine Source. The implications of this are profound and is something St. Francis emphasized, even by calling creatures and created things brother and sister. If we all stem from the same Source, we are all

related and each aspect of creation is connected, every aspect of creation has an inherent worth and value.

During our time in Thailand this reality began settling deeper within me. Where we lived there were Yellow Trumpet trees everywhere and we planted one in our front yard. I loved these trees as they were beautiful and the flowers smelled amazing. I found myself often sitting and looking at this tree, contemplating it, observing the many bees that also loved it. And as I did this the truth of our interconnection began settling in me. The truth that my existence is dependent on what I was seeing with this tree. That trees such as these and other plants, the bees pollinating, the soil and all within it, play such an integral role in the survival of human life. Each aspect of creation is interconnected, interdependent.

This is something that other traditions have emphasized and taught better than the Christian tradition has, I think, at least in the West.

Buddhism talks often of the concept of Interbeing. That nothing exists independently, including us, but everything is interconnected and interdependent. I have a tiny book by Thich Naht Hanh, who was a famous Buddhist teacher, called "How to See" and I want to read a short passage from it entitled Looking into the Rose:

**"Suppose we look deeply at a rose. With some concentration and mindfulness, we can see that the rose is made of only non-rose elements. What do we see in the rose? We see a cloud, because we know that without the cloud, there would be no rain, and without the rain, the rose couldn't grow. So a cloud is a non-rose element that we can recognize if we look deeply into the rose. Next, we can see sunshine, which is also crucial for the rose to grow. The sunshine is another non-rose element present in the rose. If you took the sunshine and the cloud out of the rose, there would be no rose left. If we continue like this, we see many other non-rose elements within the rose, including the minerals, the soil, the farmer, the gardener, and so on. The whole cosmos has come together to produce the wonder we call a rose. A rose cannot be by herself alone. A rose has to inter-be with the whole cosmos. This is the insight we call interbeing." (pp. 20-21).**

There is an emphasis in Buddhism on each aspect of creation being interconnected, interdependent.

First Nations have also done a much better job of understanding and proclaiming this reality than we have as westerners traditionally. I've quoted Randy Woodley before, a First Nations scholar and theologian. In his book 'Becoming Rooted' which is a collection of 100 short reflections on reconnecting with Sacred Earth, he speaks of this idea of all creation being connected and states, **"Like relatives, we are connected to one another whether we like it or not. The earth and the whole community of creation live with us in a reciprocal relationship. What we do to the Earth and her creatures affects us."** (pp. 3-4). Later he refers

to the concept or saying present in various First Nations tribes that can be translated as “All my relations” or “We are all related”. He states:

**“In Lakota, *mitakuye oyasin* [meet-a-koo-yay oh-yeah-sin] means something like ‘for all the above me and below me and around me things.’...I think most Indigenous peoples have some word for or understanding of this way of being—a way that sees us as living in deep relationship with other humans and all species...By giving credence to the idea that all people are related to each other, we open ourselves to the possibility of once again becoming family with all humanity. By realizing the connectedness of humankind to all animal life and life in every form, we become aware of new possibilities for learning and becoming active in species preservation. By studying humanity’s dependence upon creation, we learn how to sustain our planet, and we learn fresh prospects for developing food, water, and renewable energy. What if we are all related? What if the Lakota prayer—for all that is above me, and all that is below me, and everything that is around me—is a prayer said on behalf of our relatives? Most important of all, every human could realize the fact that peace is attainable if we are all willing to say, “We are all related.” (pp. 27-28)**

Observing the created world can draw us to God and speak to us of God’s goodness. And it can reveal to us the reality of our interconnection and interdependence with every other part of creation. An understanding that can be transformational for our lives. We have the same Source, we are all related. Each link in the great chain of being is integral, valuable, and connected.

Now, this way of looking at the world and at creation is not the common western worldview is it? But what happens when we don’t see the universe through this lens of interconnection and interdependence? When we don’t see the earth or other people as being as valuable and integral as ourselves or our nation or group? I think we see our current reality of rampant division between peoples, engagement in Us vs. Them thinking. Violence and injustice. The earth being poisoned and abused.

When we don’t see all creation as good, as interconnected through our Divine Source, as interdependent, we objectify other parts of creation. We see ourselves as the primary Subject and everyone and everything else as an Object that we can use, misuse, even abuse.

Turning our attention to a couple of our lectionary passages from this week, this is where my mind went as I read from Lamentations and Psalm 137.

In Lamentations, we read a collection of laments about the trauma the nation of Judah experienced when the Babylonians conquered them and that included the destruction of their temple and palace and the exile of many people.

We read, **“How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations! She who was queen among the provinces has now**

**become a slave. Bitterly she weeps at night, tears are on her cheeks....After affliction and harsh labor, Judah has gone into exile....” (Lam. 1:1-3).**

Psalm 137 reads much the same: **“By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?...” (Ps. 137:1-4).**

The pain is deep. They are in mourning because they have become a conquered people, their land claimed by another, sent into exile, their sense of identity broken. If we put ourselves in their shoes we can begin to imagine the trauma, the pain, the depth of their mourning and lament

They were objectified, seen as less-than. They were not considered integral and interconnected links of the same chain. They were not seen as family to their conquerors.

But as I reflected on these passages and on the trauma these people experienced I couldn't help but reflect back to the story earlier in Scripture of their ancestors likewise claiming this land from others, the Canaanites. It had been the way of the world in the past and was now continuing.

And then I reflected on the history of our nation, Canada, and how this same story had played out on this land with the First Nations. Seen as less-than, objectified, seen as unimportant and not connected as links of the same chain. It became justifiable to claim the land for ourselves, to misuse, mistreat, abuse. Because when others are not seen as integral, interconnected, related, valuable...it is easy to justify abuse.

In a book entitled *Unsettling the Word: Biblical Experiments in Decolonization* there is an adaptation of our text, Psalm 137, written by an author named Rarihokwats (Raw-Ree-Hoe-Kwats). It is Ps. 137 but adapted to a First nations perspective. It reads as follows:

### **READ pages 112-11**

The fact that a lament such as Psalm 137 can so easily be adapted for other nations and peoples shows that this same story continues repeating itself throughout human history.

Without an understanding that we as humans are all related, all valuable and integral and interdependent links of the same chain we so easily slip into objectifying the other and justify mistreating people in any number of ways, doing violence in our thoughts, words, and actions.

Without an understanding that each part of the created world is connected, each part valuable and integral and interdependent links of the same chain we easily slip into objectifying creation and justify the misuse and abuse of nature in any number of ways.

Perhaps it is too idealistic or utopian to think possible, but I do believe that when we practice seeing the world through this different lens, the lens that Buddhists may call Interbeing, that First Nations may call the idea that “We are all related”, the lens St. Francis used when he referred to the sun as brother and the moon as sister, even, I think, the lens we can find in Genesis 1 when we’re taught that each person is made in God’s image and that all of creation is ‘very good’...when we practice seeing through this lens it becomes possible for, in the words of Randy Woodley, **“every human could realize the fact that peace is attainable if we are all willing to say, “We are all related.”** (p. 28).

If we don’t, the same story that we see played out in the Old Testament with the Canaanites, the Israelites, the Judeans, and others. The same story we see played out in countless examples throughout history including in the land we reside with the First Nations. The same story of objectification, abuse, and violence in big and small ways will continue being played out leaving every individual, every nation and tribe, even the earth itself to lament like we see in Lamentations **“Bitterly she weeps at night, tears on her cheeks.”** (Lam. 1:2).

Yet that’s not the final word in God’s story. As part of the lectionary passage, later in Lamentations we read these words, **“Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”** (Lam. 3:21-23).

Despite the repeated failings of humanity we believe there is a God who is Love, who is compassionate, who is faithful. A God who continually invites us to something more, something better. A God whose love extends to every link in the chain. A God who can and will teach us to see differently if we are willing. And a God who ultimately showed us how to do this by coming to earth and living among us, inviting us to walk in the ways of the Christ.

May we continually learn from Jesus and may our God of love and compassion give us eyes to see everyone and everything as family coming from the same Divine Source.

#### **Reflections:**

1. Have you had experiences where God was revealed through nature? What was this like?
2. Why do you think other traditions have emphasized interrelation and the value of each link in the chain more than western Christianity has at times?
3. Where do you agree or disagree with thoughts expressed here?

#### **Benediction:**

As we go from here may the God of love and compassion, the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer, give us eyes to see the sacred dignity of each link in the Great Chain of Being. May we recognize our common Source and live as if we are all related.