

Francis and Us
Sunday, October 3, 2021 • St. Francis Sunday
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
Rev. Patrick C. Ward
Psalm 8

*All sheep and oxen,
Even the wild beasts of the field.
The birds of the air, the fish of the sea, *
and whatsoever walks in the paths of the sea.
O Lord our Governor, *
how exalted is your Name in all the world...*

In the name of God, creator and maker of all. AMEN

Do you remember Jane Goodall? Primatologist and anthropologist, now 87, Goodall is the person who – beginning in the 1960's – taught humankind how close we are to chimpanzees.

That we are not alone in the world! Goodall began her field work in Tanzania in the early 1960's, where she witnessed human-like activities among chimpanzees, including armed conflict.

Until COVID grounded her, Goodall was still spending 300 days a year traveling, talking to audiences, for many years now, about climate change. She has continued over Zoom.

Several weeks ago, at home in England, Goodall spoke to a journalist from *The New Yorker* about the hope as it relates to the cause she now understands as her life's work.

“Hope is not passive wishful thinking,” observes Goodall. Hope, she submits, is a “crucial survival trait.”

If you don't have hope that your action is going to make a difference, why bother to do anything? You just become a zombie.¹

Now back to zombies in just a minute.

Because today is the feast day of another saint on easy terms with the animal kingdom, perhaps the most famous saint in all of Christendom, remembered today by Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans and people of no professed creed at all: Francesco Bernadone, born in 1181, died on October 3, 1226 – 795 years ago today.

Francis of Assisi. The patron saint of Italy. The patron saint of animals and ecology, the patron saint of families and needleworkers.

By founding an order of friars minor, who lived according to Christ's guidance to the original twelve – among the people and without property – Francis exposed the hypocrisy and contradictions of the papacy in Rome. His carved or cast image stands in countless gardens, including our own here at Trinity Church. By my own count online

this past week, his life has been the subject of more than 18 feature films.

Perhaps the most famous, Zeffirelli's *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, released in 1972, was responsible for wrapping his "rich boy rejects parental values" story in a thick and excessively sweetened crust of hippie dippy flower power.

By now, in fact, there would seem to be very little about Francis' life that's not been merchandized, dramatized, or sentimentalized. Francis belongs to us, certainly. I'm wondering though if this most beloved saint might have something new to say to us this morning. About hope. And perhaps, even, about zombies.

One element of Francis life that seems to receive scant attention is his military service. *Brother Son, Sister Moon* begins with a 20-year-old Francis coming home from ill and traumatized from battle – specifically, Assisi's conflict with the neighboring hilltop town of Perugia – and in a famous scene portrays Francis waking up to the sound of a bird singing, enraptured by its beauty and healed by its presence.ⁱⁱ

One recent biography offers a deeper account of this period in Francis' life. In November of 1202, Francis, along with

many of his friends from Assisi's upper class, had ridden into battle on a mere three miles from town. Donald Spoto, in his biography *Reluctant Saint* tells that the men of Assisi were overwhelmed, and the slaughter was enormous.

Men and boys were tracked down and hacked to death, and the vineyards and fields were littered with the bodies of the dead and dying. Assisi had been resoundingly defeated.ⁱⁱⁱ

Francis and others escaped death but were taken hostage by the Perugians and held for more than a year in an underground prison. Francis subsisted on spoiled food and tainted water and when finally returned to Assisi was sick and emaciated. A historical account of Francis recovery lacks the drama you may have seen in the movies. Francis's convalescence was slow and painful:

When he had recovered a little, he began to walk about through the house with the support of a cane . . . [and] one day, he went outside and began to gaze upon the surrounding countryside. But the beauty of the fields, the delight of the vineyards and whatever else was beautiful to see, could offer him no delight at all [and he] considered those who loved these things quite foolish."^{iv}

A bit of a zombie or doing a mean imitation of one.
Certainly a person without hope.

Here at last is a saint that belongs to us. A place where we can begin. Having witnessed trauma. And in need of a new narrative. But unsure of where and how and who.

When I consider this Francis, just out of bed, haunted by slaughter, putting one foot carefully in front of the other, I am reminded that that the hope our faith offers almost always presumes a context of suffering and loss.

Death and hope meet in the cross, and Francis, in later life, would often stand or lie on the ground with his arms flung out, making himself the shape of the cross.

The good news of Francis, the best reason to love him, is this idea of progression from death into new life.

He wasn't born necessarily with the voice of the psalmist this morning, proclaiming the glory of God in all that he saw. Preaching to the birds and the fish.

This is the person God called him to be, and Francis said yes. His witnessing of violence and loss seems part of the picture. And its this progress that I'd like you to think about in the week ahead: from death into new life. From trauma into hope.

This fall we marked the 20th anniversary of 9/11.

Now I always find myself dreading that day every year as Labor Day approaches. The endless replays of the jet flying into the South Tower.

A moment in which hundreds are dying, this summer spliced in my mind into that reel that shows the collapse of the Champlain Towers South in Miami Springs, the reel that shows the last 8 minutes and forty seconds of George Floyd's life on earth, the reel that shows rising waters in the south east and consuming flames in the American West.

When I consider this Francis, just out of bed, haunted by slaughter, putting one foot carefully in front of the other, I am reminded that that the hope our faith offers almost always presumes a context of suffering and loss.

The progression is from despair into hope, from isolation into community.

That's why you are here, isn't it, on this very night?

*The birds of the air, the fish of the sea, **
and whatsoever walks in the paths of the sea.
*O Lord our Governor, **
how exalted is your Name in all the world.

Francis was never to receive a formal religious education, or to be ordained. Almost certainly, he could not have imagined a world in which humankind itself, lower than the angels, could menace the entire ecosystem God has made.

But having witnessed unspeakable violence, he was able to recognize the luck and luxury of his own hours and to see the continuing world lit with the grandeur of God.

Now especially today, in this feast day, we delight in our private pets – in their companionship and faithfulness.

The life and witness of Francis, though, asks us to see them as witnesses to something broader, deeper, higher: The unity and interdependence of all living things, a chain of provision that begins and ends in God.

A “Franciscan” approach to climate change is not only about how it is affecting us personally. Instead, he wants us to ask and to act.

How can we help our neighbors – human and animal – thrive? How can we contribute to more resilient communities in our own city and Diocese and across the world? What changes can we make in our own lives in order to care for people we may never know?

The hope of Francis had nothing to do with passive wishful thinking. His own journey from death back into life had shown him a God who had not forgotten the world.

A God always seeking to partner with us, in love with the life of the world to come.

A God already at work in you to make this weary and traumatized world new.

ⁱ Goodall quoted by Russell, Anna in “Dept. of Hope: Survival Guide” – *The New Yorker*, (October 4, 2021) p. 18

ⁱⁱ “The Awakening” from *Brother Son Sister Moon* can be viewed at <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=youtube+brother+soon+sister+moon&&view=detail&mid=CF76C4B03BDFEA924189CF76C4B03BDFEA924189&&FORM=VRDGAR&ru=%2Fvideos%2Fsearch%3Fq%3Dyoutube%2Bbrother%2Bsoon%2Bsister%2Bmoon%26FORM%3DHDRSC4>

ⁱⁱⁱ Spoto, Donald, *Reluctant Saint the life of Francis of Assisi* (New York: Penguin Compass, 2002) Kindle location 831

^{iv} *Ibid.*, Kindle location 876