The Feast of St. Francis of Assisi is celebrated on October 4th. As most of you know, he is considered the patron saint of animals and the environment. St. Francis is likely the most well known – and loved – of all the saints. I base this statement on a totally unscientific Google search of how many St. Francis garden statues are available for sale on line and in store….it’s impressive. Maybe there is one in your garden? There is certainly one in mine!

St. Francis was a mystic who devoted his life to prayer and humble poverty. He was the founder of the Franciscan monastic order – and a deacon in the Catholic Church. It’s unfortunate that he is often portrayed as a Dr. Doolittle character – a pied piper of animals, a two-dimensional character in brown monastic robes. The “real” Francis possessed an unparallel clarity about the unity of all creation. Although he isn’t usually described as a prophet his view of creation was considered radical and unique in the 1200’s. Consider this portion of one of his most famous works, the “Canticle of Brother Sun and Sister Moon”:

Most High, all powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor,
and all blessing.

To You alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no man is worthy to mention Your name.

Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures,
especially through my lord Brother Sun,
who brings the day; and you give light through him.
And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor!
Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon
and the stars, in heaven you formed them
clear and precious and beautiful.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene,
and every kind of weather through which
You give sustenance to Your creatures.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire, 
through whom you light the night and he is beautiful 
and playful and robust and strong.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Mother Earth, 
who sustains us and governs us and who produces 
varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

This work of poetry and song praises our Creator for the elements of fire and water. The words affirm Francis’s personal theology that all life is sacred. In the canticle Francis does not refer to the elements of fire, water, air as “it” but as brother or sister, he or she. This isn’t an accident of words or a quirk of the translation from the original Umbrian into English. It reflects a world view that even 800 years after his death is considered radical.

Arran Stibble is a professor of Ecological Linguistics at the University of Gloucester. In his book Animals Erased he describes the difference between honoring and protecting the earth on the one hand and conserving natural resources on the other. When we see ourselves as conserving natural resources we are protecting water, trees, land, animals and soil because of what we can GET from them as a commodity. Our resources...our goods for future trade and sale. The oil to power our machines and to heat our buildings. The water for our crops and for drinking and bathing. The food for our tables. In this view the primal elements are “its” whose value is in how we can benefit from them. This view sees “resources” as the property of human beings. It fails to acknowledge or even recognize that we are one species among an estimated 8.7 million species, all of whom must depend on the planet for our survival.

When we replace the words “natural resources” with “web of life, we are acknowledging that all the members of the biosphere are valuable and vital APART from their usefulness to human beings. We stand in awe of all other life on this planet and marvel at the deep interconnectedness of all Beings. I believe THAT is how God sees God’s world.

Within the next year our church will work together to develop a parish profile. In it we will reflect on all our ministries, we will describe our history and mission. We will identify our goals and hopes for the future as we consider the qualities we seek in our next priest. At Nativity we engage in a variety of ministries that promote and encourage Care of Creation:

- our monthly service honoring the human animal bond
- the yearly Animal Care Fair (held yesterday) hosting over 30 animal welfare groups from across our region
- the monthly lecture series addressing a variety of topics including the Endangered Species Act, composting and soil care, water conservation, and protecting pollinators.

Just last week ago we hosted Chuck Peacock from the local USDA who spoke to us about soil health and structure, no-till farming practices and the importance and diversity of soil biology. In speaking about the Soil Food Web he made us aware of “underground herd” of life below our feet. He described an entire ecosystem composed of bacteria, fungus, and micro- and macro-invertebrates on which our entire food chain depends. This drama taking place under our houses and gardens is largely invisible to us.
We acknowledge the power of the human/non-human animal bond by providing a space for the burial of ashes of companion animals. Our Parting Way Service gives space and validation to the grief and loss many people experience at the death of an animal.

You may think Nativity is “cutting edge,” or quirky, or just plain “weird” in light of these programs…but we have taken our lead from the National Episcopal Church which is deeply committed to caring for creation.

If you visit the national website of the Episcopal Church ([https://www.episcopalchurch.org/creation-care](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/creation-care)) you will find that there is a great deal of information on Caring for Creation. Indeed....this isn’t a sidebar for the Episcopal Church, but a main tenet expressed as one of the **Five Marks of Mission** adopted by the General Convention in 2009. They are:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptize and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, who leads the Episcopal Church in the United States makes this clear in his video on the national church website. In it he reminds us of the beginning words of John 3:16: “for God so loved the **World.**” The very heart of the teaching of Jesus, Bishop Curry reminds us, is to love the **world.** And the world... includes the entire planet and all life forms. In response to that the Episcopal Church is a powerful witness for addressing climate change at the local, national and international levels. The Church also understands that environmental sustainability and economic poverty are inexorably linked.

As I explored this web site I learned that the Episcopal Church partners with the Gwich’in Indians who live in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. Ninety percent of these indigenous people are Episcopalians. The Church has worked to prevent harmful oil drilling on this sacred land, a practice that would threaten the subsistence livelihood of the Gwich’in people.

The national church also supports the Episcopal Network for Animal Welfare, whose mission is “Giving voice to every creature under heaven.” The church supports and defends the Endangered Species Act, expressing the belief that “Whenever species go extinct another part of God’s body suffers crucifixion.”

The national church further encourages congregations to recognize that animals provide a unique connection to creation and expand our sense of God’s diverse gifts.

With that in mind the church approves of and provides rites and ceremonies for those grieving the loss of an animal and for the adoption of an animal. The church also recognized that animals often join us as **partners** in ministry, as therapy animals involved in the healing of human suffering.

Eight hundred years after the death of St. Francis, his theology is more vitally important than ever: a theology in which the earth and sky, seas and rivers, and all life forms are treated as integral parts of God’s creation. I’d like to close with this prayer from the 78th General Convention of the Episcopal Church:
Creation Care Prayer

God, maker of marvels,
you weave the planet and all its creatures together in kinship;
your unifying love is revealed
in the interdependence of relationships
in the complex world that you have made.
Save us from the illusion that humankind is separate and alone,
and join us in communion with all inhabitants of the universe;
through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer,
who topples the dividing walls by the power of your Holy Spirit,
and who loves and reigns with you, for ever and ever. Amen.