

October 3, 2021 – The Feast Day of St. Francis

The festival day of Saint Francis doesn't move us forward in time to Christmas or even Advent.

But it's hard not to take a little visit there with him, in light of his life and of the Bible lessons we hear today.

Francis is probably best known as the patron saint of both animals and of the environment. Many a statue in a home garden will remind us of that.

Hence Job's poetic exposition on the care God has for animals both wild and domesticated, the beautiful gift they can be to humankind and the order of all creation.

At the center of this passage from the 39th chapter of Job are two remarkable creatures: the wild ass or donkey, and the wild ox.

They draw our attention, perhaps a bit closer, when we consider that Francis is credited with setting up the first nativity scene, about 800 years ago. His biographers record it as a most simple setting: a live ox, a live donkey and a straw-filled manger set between them.

Now, it's not hard to find a contrast between the two settings, two perspectives, two images of the same two animals.

God shows Job that God knows what Job doesn't about the donkey in its natural, God-given state ... that God has made it free to make what it can of an expansive and yet harsh, sparse environment. That God has made the ox strong and left it no simple task to tame it.

At the manger, we see the ox who will wear its yoke early the next day, as it did the day before it and the day before that. The donkey that will be put to work amidst the

hustle and bustle of the city, a small one though Bethlehem may be, but still a city.

The wild versions of these animals are just that: wild. We can't reign them in – not without some serious knowledge, experience, time and effort anyway.

But the domesticated ones aren't necessarily as serene as they are often imagined. The child born where they would typically sleep cried. His new parents fretted, as perhaps did those in whose inn they were guests. How much those animals would have understood about what was happening, I don't know. But given all the hubbub, I suppose the donkey might bray its concerns and the oxen low its confusion and upset.

But the next day, they'd have been put to work same as any other. Their burden no lighter.

And after a time longer than the span of their lives, that baby boy, now a man, would speak to a crowd of human animals -- some more wild than others.

And if we bring Jesus' words forward in time to today, they again surely fall on the ears of people at all different stages and many different circumstances of life, but carrying heavy loads to varying degrees. In the midst of a pandemic and in a world otherwise disrupted in many ways, we all could use some rest from it all.

But like the ox and the donkey long ago in Bethlehem, tomorrow might feel very much the same as today does and as yesterday did if you carry a heavy weight on your shoulders.

I know that.

More importantly, God knows that.

And yet, Jesus' offer still stands.

Christ's promise still stands.

He has a yoke to lay upon as we learn from him and try to follow where he leads. It's not airy and feathery light. Even Jesus' direction is sometimes not what our weary hearts and stubborn minds want to accept.

But it sure beats the alternative.

I don't envy the wild donkey, whether foraging foreboding mountains as in Job nor in weathering the unforgiving sun and sand of the Sonoran Desert as I would often see them a few years ago. Nor the rented mules that carried our gear as we rode horses up in to the Sierra Nevada the one and only time I went backcountry horse camping.

But Jesus lifts up an alternative to either extreme of eking out a lonely existence or existing to meet the demands of others.

We read a few poems before we blessed the animals in yesterday's form of celebrating the life and legacy and ministry of St. Francis.

But here is one from a different author that may give insight for today:

**When things go wrong, as they sometimes will,
When the road you're trudging seems all uphill,
When the funds are low and the debts are high,
And you want to smile but you have to sigh,
When care is pressing you down a bit -
Rest if you must, but don't you quit.**

**Life is queer with its twists and turns.
As everyone of us sometimes learns.
And many a fellow turns about when he
Might have won had he stuck it out.
Don't give up though the pace seems slow -**

You may succeed with another blow.

Often the goal is nearer than it seems

To a faint and faltering man;

Often the struggler has given up when he

Might have captured the victor's cup;

And he learned too late when the night came down,

How close he was to the golden crown.

Success is failure turned inside out -

The silver tint of the clouds of doubt,

And when you never can tell how close you are,

It may be near when it seems afar;

So stick to the fight when you're hardest hit -

It's when things seem worst,

You must not quit.

Those words are attributed to Edgar Guest, exactly 100 years ago. In a world emerging from the last pandemic of this scope. And I think it meshes with what Jesus is communicating to those of us interested in taking up his yoke.

We can't get through difficult days alone. If we think we can ... yes, we may survive, but at a cost. Along with the light load Jesus asks us to carry, there are tools for perseverance. A good Word, prayer and the love of the beloved community whom he called to be his church.

In the middle of it, we need rest. We may crave more of it than we can get right now but I think Jesus is inviting us into brief respites, if not yet the entirety of what our bodies, our minds, our souls crave. I believe he is looking to us to be the hands and feet of his body, helping to give that much-needed rest to one another and to the ones he loves, and who by extension, we are called to love. We can carry one another's

heavy burdens with the helping hand of Jesus to lift it and make it a lighter load for one another.

We've seen the alternative. St. Francis saw it. He lived it. He lived the seemingly carefree life of a rich young man, untethered to any responsibility for his neighbors and finally realized the weight he accumulated along that path. He came home to live among those same neighbors and to inspire them.

He laid that burden at the feet of Christ and picked up Jesus' lighter yoke instead ... his teachings, his gentleness, his humility.

And that, my friends, is the only way forward that makes any sense. That provides hope for the darkest hours. May we gladly take it upon our shoulders and place our faith in Jesus to give us the wisdom, the guidance and the relief we need for this day and all those which lie ahead.

Amen.