

## **“All the Earth”**

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*<sup>11</sup>May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully <sup>12</sup>giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. <sup>13</sup>He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, <sup>14</sup>in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

*<sup>15</sup>He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; <sup>16</sup>for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup>He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup>He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. <sup>19</sup>For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, <sup>20</sup>and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. <sup>21</sup>And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, <sup>22</sup>he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him...*

*(Colossians 1:11-22)*

Like her mother before her, my mother was given a love and a gift for laying out shrubs, flowers, ground cover, bird baths and brick-lined paths that transformed our backyard into a little oasis of life and peace. I remember that in one area we had a little statue of Saint Francis of Assisi, wearing his standard uniform of a long robe, sandals, neatly trimmed beard, and a bird in the hand. It is just one of the ways that we have transformed the patron saint of animals and ecology into an icon of peace and harmony, and it is very much in keeping with the man behind this legend.

But the actual Francis of Assisi was so much more than what we see in that stony image keeping silent watch over countless gardens. He was the founding inspiration for the Franciscan order, a category of monks and nuns who commit themselves to vows of poverty, service, and itinerant preaching. Since their founding in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Franciscans have been serious, committed people of faith who hold fast to a mystical devotion to Jesus Christ. As one thoughtful observer has noted, when we neglect this aspect of Francis' life we invariably reduce his powerful spirituality down to something “sentimental, cheap, and harmless.”<sup>1</sup> Yes, Francis loved animals and yes, he stands as a symbol of ecological and spiritual peace, but at his core Francis held fast to a faith that was able to see Jesus -- simultaneously -- as both an incarnate, gentle, personal presence in every human life, and also as the Eternal “Cosmic Christ” who was with God the Creator when the foundations of the universe were being laid.<sup>2</sup>

This morning's passage from Colossians paints one of the clearest portraits of this “Cosmic Christ” in all of scripture. “*He is,*” the passage reads, “*the image of the invisible God,*

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<sup>1</sup> “The Cosmic Christ,” daily meditations from the Center for Action and Contemplation, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/the-cosmic-christ-2015-11-05/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*



*the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible... all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*" Now, this is just me talking, but in many ways religion has taken Jesus and whittled him down into something akin to those St. Francis garden statues that go for around \$59.95 on Amazon or Wayfair – a Jesus who forgives everything and expects nothing, someone who sits immovably and passively in the periphery of our lives, leaving us to our own devices to get on with whatever we have set our minds upon that day... something largely “sentimental, cheap, and harmless.”

The real St. Francis of Assisi would be horrified by such a development. Christ, he would say, is so “much bigger and older than either Jesus of Nazareth or the Christian religion,” because “Christ” is the point – in fact Christ is every point, every time, and every place – where that which is earthy and mortal and that which is divine and eternal co-exist — which, he would add, “is always and everywhere.”<sup>3</sup> One of the real strengths of the mystic faith of St. Francis was that he was somehow able to hold onto both images of Jesus at the same time – Jesus the person of love and grace who is grounded with us in the soil of our existence – and the Christ who stands in magnificent, cosmic power above everything. They were, to Francis, two sides of the same divine coin.

If we can try to grasp this mystical understanding of Jesus -- if we can hold onto this duality as Franciscan religious communities throughout history have worked to do -- it can transform our understanding of what you and I are doing here on this planet. In the second chapter of Genesis, when God has completed creation of the heavens and the earth, and has placed the first human beings in the center of the Garden of Eden, God gives Adam (whose name is literally the Hebrew word for “man”) a very specific charge and purpose. The *adam*, formed from the soil, was placed in the garden to “till it and keep it” (Gen. 2:15). There were two verbs, two actions, two things to do.

The first, *abad*, speaks to labor and muscle. In Garden of Eden, Adam was the groundskeeper. His job was to work the soil, till the ground, plant the seeds, and pull the weeds. He was created to be a servant, and the garden was his sole client. God expected him to roll up his sleeves and get to work.

The second verb was different. The other half of Adam’s job was to “keep” the garden. This verb, *shamar*, means to keep watch or to preserve. It’s what a shepherd does, keeping watch over her sheep. It’s what a police officer does when she preserves and protects. In the Old Testament, it is also what a king or queen was expected to do, if the sovereign was doing their job correctly. A sovereign ruler was expected to watch over, protect, encourage and preserve the citizens of the realm. And this charge to Adam was every bit as lofty as this sounds. This second aspect of the charge carried with it an air and implication of great importance, authority, and responsibility in the garden.

Together, these two verbs made up Adam’s vocation, the human job in Eden. Again, they were two sides of the same coin. God created humans to be both groundskeepers and overseers; worker bees and supervisors.

In much the same way, Christ is both with us on the ground, kneeling with us as we work the soil... and at the same time above it all, reigning in dominion and power as the Master Gardener of the cosmos. We see the scope of Christ’s reign in the stars and the planets of the universe... but we also encounter God in the industry of a tiny ant... the quiet

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<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

buzzing work of pollinator bees and butterflies... and the microscopic miracles of medicines rooted in nature that have the power to heal multitudes.

Like Francis of Assisi, we experience the peace and grace of God's presence in our lives. We recognize the beauty of what God has created, and the gentle way that Christ walks with us and abides with us.

At the same time, as the psalmist says, we make a joyful noise with all the earth, singing with the entirety of creation a new song for the marvelous things God has done. As the seas roar, as the floods clap their hands, and as the hills sing together with joy, we join our voices to the cosmic chorus that gives praise to the God whose power reigns over the winds and the waves.

May we be reminded today that we have been given a great gift and a great responsibility -- two sides of the same heavenly coin. Let us praise God for the greening of the grass, the blooming of the trees, the blue skies above, and the tender way that Christ's love wraps us each and every day. At the same time, let us never lose sight of the awesome job we have been given. The Cosmic Christ, the One who laid the foundations of this earth and reigns sovereign over all that is, has given us an urgent commission, a sacred duty, to preserve, protect and keep watch over God's creation. May God give us the sight, the wisdom, and the courage to do what must be done to safeguard the garden that has been entrusted to us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. ***Amen.***