



The Feast of St. Francis

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
Sunday, October 5, 2008*

Tobit 5:4–5, 16; 6:1; 11:4:

As Tobias planned his journey to Media to pick up ten talents of silver deposited there by his father Tobit, he went out to find a man who knew the way and would accompany him for the whole journey, and he came face to face with the angel Raphael. Not knowing he was the angel of God, Tobias questioned him: “Where do you come from, young man?” “I am an Israelite”, Raphael replied, “and have come here to find work.” Tobias asked him, “Do you know the road to Media?” “Yes”, he said, “I have often been there; I am familiar with all the routes and know them well.” Tobias introduced Raphael to his father who promised to pay him a drachma a day for his help, besides the expenses of the journey. “Keep my son company on his travels”, said Tobit, “and I will add something to your wages.” Tobit blessed his son Tobias and said, “May God in heaven keep both of you safe on your journey there, and may God’s angel safely escort you both.” And so the boy Tobias and the angel left the house together, and the dog came out with Tobias and accompanied them, following at their heels.

Did you like that first reading from the *Book of Tobit*? We don’t often hear it. The young lad, Tobias, setting forth on the journey of life, finds someone to show him the way—someone, it turns out, who is none other than the great Archangel Raphael. Tobias and his dad Tobit were completely blind to Raphael’s true identity, unaware he was among the throng that included Archangels Michael and Gabriel. Thus, Tobias set forth, guided by an Archangel and accompanied by his dog following at their heels.

As we travel down the road on our own journeys, I wonder if we too are guided by an archangel unawares. . . . Certainly many here today enjoy the company of a dog or creature.

We’re in the midst of a rough patch on the road just now; the lack of clarity around our nation’s economy is frightening, and we’re feeling the effect. We’re engaged in the longest war this country has seen since the American Revolution. Episcopalians in this Diocese are unsure about what lies ahead. Hearing that Bishop Bennison has received a sentence to be deposed, removed from holy orders, may signify justice, yet it is painful, sad news. The next steps are not yet clear. We shall need to rely on faith that in good times and bad God is with us, and the angels are near at hand.

The path for Francis of Assisi, whose life we celebrate this day—his path took an abrupt turn early in his life. Born to extraordinary privilege, power and wealth, Francis experienced an overwhelming conversion: his life was turned around by God. Renouncing all worldly possessions, even stripping himself naked and breaking all family ties, he committed himself to serving God, by serving the poorest of the poor. As did Jesus before him, when not in prayer, Francis spent his time with lepers and prostitutes, the abandoned dregs of society. God converted Francis to a new way of life. Might we also be converted?—freed to relinquish even a fraction of our clinging to wealth, status and security?

What I see and hear in Francis’ life is a proposition, a challenge, to my own life. I find myself dreaming great dreams of creating a life that is just and good, that is sacrificial and generous, a life that is devoted and given to walking with God. I would like to live such a life. My own dreams need not look just like Francis’ dreams. We are different, he and I, living different lives in different times. Nonetheless, I find the deepest and most admirable part of me is touched by his story, awoken, called forth from slumber into possibility.

One morning last week, while attending a conference in Canton, North Carolina, deep in the hills of the Great Smoky Mountains, I rose early. The stars were still bright in the sky, the night crickets chirruping. I left my cabin and with flashlight found the boathouse and slipped the canoe into the dark lake as the sky began to brighten. Prompted by the cold air on the warm water, the mist swirled and danced, living breath of God. The ducks took flight, then settled again at a distance, while the sun rose to peer down from the far mountains.

There is planted within each of us a great dream of how the world might be and how we might be at peace with one another in that world. In the dream, we are not mere recipients of the gift; we are bearers and creators, those who shall help bring it forth. It is a dream planted in our hearts by God, even as we grew in our mother's womb.

But we are soon confronted with a dilemma, a choice, for we quickly find that the dream may be unattainable. Our hearts long, so we know it is real, yet seemingly beyond our grasp. I have not the strength of will to give myself so fully as did Francis, even if I so desired. Besides which, life seems ceaselessly to throw up obstacles in our path. We are crippled by fears, insecurities, infirmities. We are called upon to tend first to this task, and then to that one. We grow busy trying to build up enough security to take care of ourselves and those we love. We are slammed by calamities—a sudden injury, loss of job. Years pass, we grow older. Perhaps we even grow wiser, gentler. Yet the dream too long deferred, withers, like a raisin in the sun. One option is to abandon the dream, to concede, ultimately to despair.

The other option? To take the next step. To do one small thing that is the right thing, one small thing that takes us along the path toward the dream. We begin here. The realization of the dream may be far in the distance. To bridge the distance, we have only two choices: chip away at the dream, pare it down to something modest, within reach; or take another step forward, upward, toward creating the dream, bringing it into fullness of being. Francis inspired all of Christendom, yet his attention was on the person in need standing right in front of him.

I am thinking of very concrete things here. That conference in the Great Smoky Mountains was designed to help us develop some plans for our own lives: personal goals for our relationships, goals for our spiritual well-being, our careers, goals for health and our finances—good things, lofty things. And do you know what the deciding factor often is in realizing those goals? You know what it is that dictates whether or no we make progress. It's how we spend our time, and how we use our money. I can have all the great ideas I want, but if I don't make time to do something about them, they won't happen. I can tell myself that I want to spend some time every day in prayer, but if I don't actually schedule that time—to set it aside and safeguard it—it will quickly be gobbled up by other things. I can tell myself that I would really like to be more involved with organizations that help people in need, but if I don't budget the money, I won't have any to give to that organization; and if I don't schedule the time, I won't be there to help. The great dreams must be worked out in the terrain of daily living.

I was moved to participate in a special worship service yesterday in which the Episcopal Church publicly repented for its role in the institution and perpetuation of slavery. In one sense, it was a very small thing in the face of a very great evil, yet it was a huge symbolic step, an important and promising act.

I believe a paramount step for every person is to come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of those from whom we differ most—be those differences racial, cultural, economic, political, sexual. We're on this journey together. Yet most of the time we segregate ourselves from others, congregating close to whatever is most familiar. Francis's life changed when he experienced the poverty of others around him. And it seems obvious to say this, but he couldn't experience those others until he stepped outside his own family villa and went to where those others were. We need to step outside of our own circles of community—if only to touch for a brief moment the lives that others live, to at least give ourselves the chance of being changed by their experience.

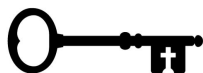
When I ran a shelter for homeless men, arguably the most important thing I did was to create a bridge, a means whereby those who lived in comfortable, protected communities could come and spend a couple of hours in the shelter with those men who were homeless. Some of the people who came fulfilled their obligation, then fled back to safety. Others came and were transformed, suddenly awakened to that crisis and awakened to the possibility that they could do something about it. They took just one step; often it led to many others—to a life that was changed. Each of the outreach ministries at St. Peter's creates a similar bridge, over which we may cross beyond our places of comfortable insularity and meet the other—perhaps for just a single meeting, and perhaps the first of which will lead to many more and, in time, a life changed by the other.

In a few weeks time, those of you who are members of this congregation will be invited to make a financial pledge to the church. It is going to feel especially precarious for many of us this year, with the economy and with our own financial security in such a volatile state. When I first made a pledge it was at that same church where the shelter was. Previously, I hadn't given much thought to how much money I gave to the church or any other organization. So I didn't give much. But I was invited then—and I invite you now—to touch upon that dream of how things might be in this world, with goods shared and distributed so that all are fed and cared for—an abundance for all. What I realized was that I wanted to give. It is part of my dream, God's dream. Giving—being givers—is part of who we are. It is part of our spiritual practice to give generously as we are able. So when we give to the church, it is not so the church can do things spiritual; rather, it is because our giving is a spiritual act.

Francis gave away everything. I don't want to give away everything. I'd like to give more than I do give, but it's hard because I need what I have; at least I think I need it. It's hard because I get scared that there won't be enough for other things that matter. The important thing is to not abandon the dream or chisel away at it. The important thing is to take the next step, to give some this year and a little more the next, to stretch beyond what is comfortable and give according to our dream.

To come full circle: dreaming great dreams of creating a life that is just and good, that is sacrificial and generous, a life that is devoted and given to walking with God. It is we who take the steps toward such a life, yet it is God who gives the dream; it is Christ working within us who gives us strength in the rough patches; it is the angels and often the creatures who guide us on the way. It is we who act, yet it is Christ who gives the life and the power.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”



Open hearts. Open minds.