

“Pedaling Through Pentecost”

Acts 2: 1-21  
*The Canticle of Brother Sun*  
By St. Francis of Assisi

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It’s one thing to read this hymn in church with our four walls, long, hard pews, carpeted floors, and thermostat-controlled temperature. Imagine, however, that we had read or sung this hymn from St. Francis at the top of Larch Mountain or from the Vista House on Crown Point. Imagine you had just ridden your bicycle forty miles on a damp spring day through the town of Corbett. Imagine that your heart is pumping, your lungs are gasping for that mountain air, and your face is tingling as the first rays of sun break through on this chilly mountain ride. Imagine what it would feel like to look out over the Cascades or down the picturesque Columbia Gorge and then read this hymn from St. Francis.

“Be praised, my Lord, with all Your creatures,  
Especially Sir Brother Sun,  
By whom you give us the light of day!  
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor.  
Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Moon and the Stars!  
In the sky You formed them bright and lovely and fair.  
Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Wind  
And for the Air and the cloudy and clear and all Weather,  
By which You give sustenance to Your creatures!  
Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Water,  
Who is very useful and humble and lovely and chaste!  
Be praised, my Lord, for our Sister Mother Earth,  
Who sustains and governs us,  
And produces fruits with colorful flowers and leaves!

Does it feel different to imagine passionately reciting those words while standing on Crown Point just as the sun rays break through the rain rather than from your usual Sunday pew? I believe in recent times the Church has made a mistake: we have over-identified the worship of God with our building and properties. We have forgotten that the experience of God is not limited to a building; it is not confined to just Sunday mornings between 9:00 and 12:00. I read this *Canticle of Brother Sun* by St. Francis of Assisi because it reminds us of one of the neglected strands of our own Christian tradition—that is, the mystical tradition.

The mystical tradition is less concerned about having certain beliefs in God and more focused on how to nurture the direct experience of God. Or as God is often referred to these days as the sacred or the divine. Most of us have heard of St. Francis of Assisi through the prayer of St. Francis (*Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.*). What you probably don’t know is that St. Francis, who founded the order of the Franciscans, held that there was a 7-fold process for achieving mystical union with God. The first two steps are what he called “experiencing God through the vestiges of the universe and the vestiges of our senses”—that is, taste, touch, sight, sound, and smell. The word *vestige* comes from the Latin word *vestigium* which means “footprint.” What St. Francis was saying is that he believed it was by seeing and sensing the metaphorical footprint of God that we first experience the sacred. In other words, it was through seeing the physical signs of God’s presence in the world around us.

Isn't that why so many of us live here in the Northwest? Isn't that part of what brings us so much joy and beauty in this place we call home? I am sure that God is just as present in the endless cornfields of Iowa or in the rolling wheat fields of North Dakota. But, don't those of us who live here sort of mean it when we say, "this is God's country!" Ninety minutes to the West is the stunning and overwhelming Pacific Ocean. Ninety minutes in the other direction Mt. Hood inspires our sense of awe year round. When the dogwoods and the cherry trees erupt in bloom it's as if the beauty of God herself is on display. And Portland is blessed to have two great rivers that connect us to wildlife habitats, bird sanctuaries and the nether world of fish and water creatures.

All of this inspires in us a sense of awe, an appreciation of beauty, breathless grandeur, and hearts of gratitude. St. Francis, one of our tradition's mystics is known for falling in love with the animals and birds, the landscapes, the moon and the sun around him. What is interesting to me is that in his 7-fold process for union with God he names specifically that experiencing God in nature and through our senses comes first. I wonder if that changes how we see our local weekend warriors who would rather be skiing, hiking, or cycling on a Sunday morning than sitting in a pew in a church. I wonder where St. Francis spent his Sunday mornings.

I chose to do this service today on Pentecost Sunday for a reason. Pentecost Sunday is when we tell the story of how the disciples were suddenly struck by the Holy Spirit and were able to share the story of God in the native tongues of people from all over the known world. Of course, in this story those languages all had to do with the native tongues of nations and regions. But, I think we make a mistake if we limit this story to just national languages and dialects. I wonder if the story of Pentecost is just the right story for our time today as well.

We have become accustomed (I would say over-accustomed) to associating the language of God with the programs of the church, with the actual church building, with our religious lingo, and with people who call themselves Christian. But, just beyond these church walls, people are experiencing God, but calling God by different names. Some say when they head into the mountains that they are walking on sacred ground. Others look out over Crown Point and think this is just about as close to heaven or divine as one can get. Still others sit in awe on an ocean cliff and find themselves experiencing a power much greater than themselves. And I wonder if these are not the contemporary languages of Pentecost today. It's not about being able to talk in German, or Russian, or Chinese. It's about being able to listen for the experience of God even when people refer to that experience in unfamiliar terms.

And one of those terms today is through the language of mysticism. Except mysticism really isn't a contemporary language. Mysticism sounds like a new spiritual fad when in reality it has its roots deep in the Christian tradition over the last 1500 years. Interestingly enough, many of today's religious denominations were actually founded by the mystics of the past. The big thing that distinguishes the mystics from our time is this: they emphasized the direct experience of God over simple belief in God. They looked for the signs of God in nature, through their senses, and in the people around them. They didn't need a church to experience God because God was wherever they found themselves.

In Boulder, Colorado there is a Jewish community called Adventure Rabbi. In many ways this is a traditional Jewish community. They hold Bar and Bat Mitzvah's. They celebrate Shabbat and Passover. They read the Torah and learn about their history. What distinguishes them from other Jewish communities is they have no synagogue. They have no building, yet are a thriving community. They are a community of Jews who come together to experience God in

the natural world. They go up into the Rocky Mountains and they hike, they ski, they bike, they raft, and they go on retreat. The rabbi herself, Jamie Korngold, explains how her most vibrant Jewish experiences were in the outdoors. “From scaling mountains to running ultra-marathons” she describes how the spirituality of the wilderness awakens her Jewish identity. On their website is this welcome: *“Surrounded by the raw wonder of creation, Rabbi Korngold helps people experience an inner peace and an abiding connection to That Which is Greater Than Ourselves. In the wilderness, she believes, it is possible to distance ourselves from politics and protocol and allow the awareness of the connectedness of all things to permeate our souls. Come join us; let the wilderness awaken your Judaism.”*

And really, none of this is surprising. How many of you have felt closest to God when out in the wilderness or walking along the beach or gazing into a reflective lake? How many people talk about their days spent in church camp as the times when God really came alive for them? I know for me I love being part of the Church, but as often as I can get on one of my three bikes and head up into the hills where God just seems a little closer for some reason.

We offer this bike blessing today because we want you to experience the sacredness of enjoying God’s good Creation. We want you to feel the wind in your hair, the rain on your face, and the sun on your back and know that all of this goodness originated in the mind of some divine artist. We want to honor your commitment to nurturing and treating your body with respect. We want to honor your intention to eat bananas in favor of consuming more oil. And finally, we want to bless your bikes for safety reminding you that no matter how virtuous you are, cars are still bigger, bulkier, and faster than you. Given a choice, I would rather bless your bike now than bless your body later!

To all of us today, remember that God is experienced in many, many ways. We can experience the warmth of God in worship on Sundays as we pray and sing and meditate. We can experience the presence of God in community as we show our love and care for each other. And we can also experience God while walking among the blooming cherry trees or cycling up the Columbia Gorge. We can experience the sacred when we are sitting in quiet contemplation. And we can experience the divine when our lungs are burning, our heart is racing, and our spirits are soaring. Pray your way through Pentecost or pedal your way through Pentecost. It doesn’t much matter. Because God is just as present when we are sitting on a hard bike seat as He is when we are sitting in a wooden pew.