

# Francis & Clare: Learning from Creation

*A Curriculum for Children & Youth*



*Worship Resources for the Creative Church*

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# Sacred Seasons



## Worship Tools for the Creative Church

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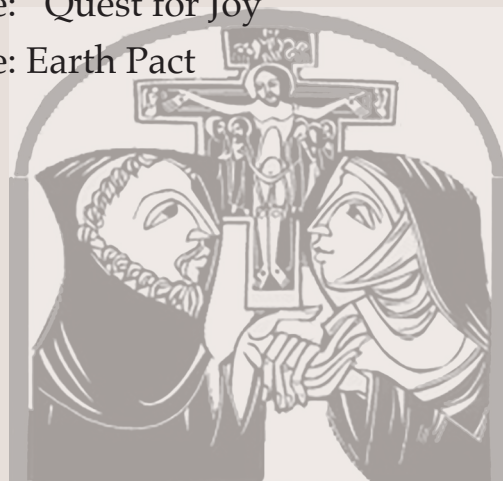
### Statement of Purpose

Seeds of Hope, Inc., is a private, independent group of believers responding to a common burden for the poor and hungry of God's world, and acting on

# Francis & Clare: Learning from Creation

...in this resource:

- 3 Introduction
- 4 Creation: Learning from Scripture  
*Biblical Background*
- 4 Talking with Youth  
about the Creation Stories
- 5 Activities for Youth and /or Children
- 6 Activities for Youth
- 6 Activities for Children
- 7 Closing Activities
- 10 Activity Resource: "Song to the Sun"
- 11 Activity Resource: "Quest for Joy"
- 12 Activity Resource: Earth Pact



the strong belief that biblical mandates to feed the poor were not intended to be optional. Since 1991, the group has sought out people of faith who feel called to care for the poor; and to affirm, enable and empower a variety of responses to the problems of hunger and poverty.

### Editorial Address

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Art is from the cover of A Retreat with Francis & Clare of Assist by Murray Bodo & Susan Saint Sing

# Francis & Clare: Learning from Creation

## A Curriculum for Children & Youth

by Katie Cook

*Author's note: This curriculum is adapted and updated from a lesson written years ago for Intersections, the Smyth & Helwys Publisher's youth curriculum series.*

### I. Introduction

Young people in our postmodern society often have little or no connection with nature. The great American conservationist/philosopher Aldo Leopold once said that a generation would come to our country who know only that milk comes from the grocery store and heat from the furnace.<sup>1</sup>

This kind of disconnectedness from the sources of our sustenance causes us to have a dry, antiseptic attitude toward the created world around us. We have isolated ourselves from the natural world with our air- and sound-conditioning and our paved cities, and thus we have also isolated ourselves from something that is vital to our spirits.

Leopold also said, "There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot."<sup>2</sup> Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that some of us admit that we need to be closer to nature, and others deceive ourselves. It is probably no coincidence that when we plan spiritual retreats, we invariably go away from "civilization" to places where we can encounter unsculptured trees and bushes, field flowers, streams, hidden meadows, birds—wild things.

The world of St. Francis and St. Clare, although they did not have our technology, had reached a similar reality. The townspeople of the city-state of Assisi in the 13th century were materialistic, as are many people in our society today. Success for them, in many ways, meant protection and alienation from the natural world.

Umbria, the area of northern Italy where Assisi is located, was (and is) delightful in terms of natural beauty. Assisi is surrounded in summer by gorgeous fields of flowers and deep blue skies. In winter, the

snow lies on majestic sloping peaks. Yet the people, like us, were preoccupied with the making and amassing of money, power, and prestige—even in the church—so that they could insulate themselves against the natural world.

Francis's and Clare's families were landowners. Francis's father, Pietro de Bernadone, was a wealthy cloth merchant. Clare's family, the Offreduccio family, was of the noble class. Yet these two young adults rejected the comfortable ways of their families and embraced a sometimes harsh lifestyle of poverty, a lifestyle vulnerable to the elements and also to the treasures of nature.

They gathered around them a small company of men and women who believed, as they did, that the teachings of Jesus, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, could be taken seriously—if not literally. One of the central verses of that passage calls the hearer to "consider the lilies of the field," and this is exactly what the first Franciscans did.

In fact, one of the most important aspects of the lifestyle that these early Franciscans adopted was a love and respect for all creatures. Both Francis and Clare believed that everything in the created universe was their brother or sister, and they ran headlong to join all these things in praising God.<sup>3</sup>

One of the last things that Francis wrote, lying with a terminal illness in the house of Clare and her followers, the Poor Clares, was a poem called "The Canticle of the Creatures," or sometimes called "The Song to the Sun." It is a litany of creatures—Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water, Brother Fire, and so on.<sup>4</sup> The fact that he wrote this while suffering great pain and nearing total blindness shows how great was his love for these creatures.

Francis and Clare, in their simple yet powerful way, lead us in discovering much about God through creation.

## II. Creation: Learning from Scripture

Text: Genesis 1:1-31

### Background

Some students of the Old Testament say that the first few chapters of Genesis are among the most important and best known in scripture, and are also among the most misunderstood. Most biblical scholars, when beginning to study any given passage, will begin with a look at the historical context of the writing. Most Old Testament scholars generally agree, however, that there is no particular historical context to the first passages of Genesis.<sup>5</sup>

The first chapter of Genesis was probably written for liturgical use. Many Old Testament interpreters maintain that it was written by a group of writers known as the Priestly historians (named so because of an emphasis on priestly legislation in the document attributed to them), during or after the Babylonian exile of the Hebrew people—that is, after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE.

It is important to understand that the story, when it was finally inscribed, had been through centuries of oral tradition, in which it had slowly evolved and strengthened.<sup>6</sup>

This, the first of the creation stories in Genesis,<sup>7</sup> uses a beautiful, poetic narration that describes God “speaking” light, land and living creatures into existence—and it also describes God’s spirit brooding over the primeval chaos as a hen broods over her egg until it hatches. It is a story that unfolds, step by step, as God systematically creates order and beauty out of chaos.<sup>8</sup>

There are several significant themes that run through this list of events. One is that God and the cosmos are bound together in a profound way. Another is that all created things stand before God both as a unit, and as individuals. Still another shows the newly made humans given a special role of caring for and stewardship over the other creatures.<sup>9</sup>

The overall message of this story, however, is that life in this universe began in goodness. (Note the repeated phrase, “And God saw that it was good.”) The ensuing chapters in Genesis will show all too soon that life includes tragedy, but chapter one shows in glowing terms that goodness came first.

Another vital lesson of the story is that the universe did not come into existence by chance, that it did not “advance by the blind gropings of unconscious energies.”<sup>10</sup> The universe was made

to fit together and have meaning—and to be characterized by intrinsic goodness.

This narration has something significant to say to humans. In this so-called post-Christian society, there are many who see the cosmos as a vast, unfeeling entity and human individuals as merely “dust in the wind.” According to this interpretation, we may be sustained by the other forces in the universe, or we may be crushed by them—and it doesn’t matter which happens, to anyone but the individual.<sup>11</sup>

The creation stories in Genesis contradict this notion by asserting that God is a God of order, meaning and beauty. Perhaps this is the reason that most people, without understanding why, feel somehow comforted by the spectacle of a colorful sunset or a butterfly in flight, or the sound of a brook or skylark. These things are symbols of those attributes of God, a reminder of the belief that all was good in the beginning, a hope that perhaps goodness will prevail in the end.

## III. Talking with Youth about the Creation Stories

Francis and Clare of Assisi looked at the wild things around them and embraced the beauty that they beheld in them. In that beauty they saw the loving hand of God and felt that all creation was beloved. Not only that; they felt that they, themselves, were beloved. They found reassurance that goodness still existed in the midst of their world—a world at war, a world with devastating poverty and disease, a world in which the one existing church was corrupt, a world where people didn’t have a long life expectancy. Francis and Clare found joy in the simplicity that they adopted, because it caused them to be more dependent on God and more closely connected to nature. Where did they find their inspiration for this? The first chapter of the Bible tells a story that inspires this kind of appreciation of nature.

Some of the youth may bring up the question of whether the activities described in today’s passage actually took place in six days. You can help them to understand that the important questions about this chronicle are not “How?” and “When?” but “Who?” and “Why?” It may be helpful to explain that the story was passed on from generation to generation as an oral tradition and recorded during or after



the Babylonian exile, which is actually quite late in terms of the history of the Hebrew scriptures.

It is good to allow these discussions, and to guide the students in thinking critically and responsibly about such passages, but the important message here is a personal one: that we are beloved by God, and that we and the cosmos were crafted by God with a loving purpose.

Ask the students to turn to Genesis 1 in their Bibles. Ask them to imagine that they are among the first Franciscans in the 13th century. Divide them into small groups and ask them to discuss how Francis, Clare, and the others would interpret this passage. Give them a few minutes to discuss, and then ask the groups to share their conclusions. Then ask the groups to discuss their own interpretation of the passage. How is it different or similar to what they concluded about the early Franciscans? Give them a few minutes again, and then ask each group to share their ideas with the class.

## IV. Learning Activities

### A. Activities for Youth and/or Children

#### • A New Look at an Old Hymn

*Materials:* Hymnals or copies of the hymn “All Creatures of Our God and King”

*Optional:* Someone to accompany the students on the piano or some other instrument

Distribute hymnals or copies of “All Creatures of Our God and King.” Ask the students to sing all of the stanzas with you, paying special attention to the words. You might even want to stop between stanzas and discuss the contents of each verse.

Tell them about Francis and Clare of Assisi, how Francis wrote the poem from which these lyrics are taken in the year 1225. It might be interesting to them that Francis and Clare involved themselves in activities almost 800 years ago in which many present-day environmentalists are involved. For instance, Francis, who was declared by the Vatican in 1967 to be the patron saint of the newly accepted science of ecology, once traveled on foot for hundreds of miles to intercede with the emperor for a flock of birds.<sup>12</sup>

After sharing the above information, ask questions like the following:

- *How does it feel to know something about the author of these hymn lyrics?*
- *Why do you suppose Francis and Clare were so*

*interested in animals and nature?*

- *How do you feel about animals and trees? Do you feel a kinship to them?*

#### • Song to the Sun

*Materials:* Copies of “The Song to the Sun” (see page 10)

Distribute copies of “The Song to the Sun.” Divide the class into two groups, and ask them to read the poem antiphonally. Then invite them to think for a few minutes about the possibility that they as a class might write such a litany. Ask them to identify creatures or aspects of creation that they would include. Take a few minutes to help them think of things that are unique to your geographical location. The students may think of something unusual or humorous, and that’s okay—a little humor won’t hurt.<sup>16</sup> There may also be some humor if the youth decide to assign the names “brother” and “sister” to their list of creatures.<sup>17</sup>

With the help of the youth, select a “scribe,” and write these out in your own “Litany of Praise.”<sup>18</sup>

Then ask questions like these:

- *What do you think Francis is trying to say in this poem?*
- *What does your own litany say about how you see your world?*
- *Francis and Clare believed that we can learn about God from other creatures. What do you suppose the animals might know that we don’t know?*

#### • Nature Hunt

*Materials:* Spiral notebook and pencil

Ask the students to go on an old-fashioned “nature walk.” Walk with them around the church campus and point out trees, leaves, squirrels, flowers, snails—any natural beauty that they see. Select someone to keep a list as you go; this will cause them to be more intentional and focused as they walk. Be sure that you allow enough time to do this. Tell them that this will serve as a kind of “mobile” benediction. (*This might work well with “The Color Purple” below.*)

#### • “And God Stepped Out on Space”

*Materials:* A copy of James Weldon Johnson’s sermon/poem, “The Creation”<sup>21</sup>

Ask a friend or someone from the church to come in at the end of the session to read or recite “The Creation” by James Weldon Johnson. Before your guest arrives, tell the youth that they are about

to hear how an African-American minister/poet interpreted the creation story. Encourage them to sit back and enjoy the reading as a benediction for today's session. (*Johnson's version of the creation is taken from Genesis 2. If your students are apt to notice the difference in order from the one they have been reading, you may want to point this out.*)

### • The Color Purple

*Materials:* A small table, a purple cloth, small pieces of paper and pencils for each student<sup>23</sup>

There is a passage in the book *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, in which Shug Avery tells Celie that she thinks God gets upset if you walk through a field of purple flowers and don't notice them. Tell the students about this.

Get a purple cloth and put it on a table in the middle of the room. Ask the students to think of gifts of nature that they have noticed during the week before. Ask them to write this on a small piece of paper and place it on the "color purple" table. Then have a closing prayer of thanks for purple flowers and other beauties of creation. (*This could also be incorporated with the nature walk above.*)

## B. Activities for Youth

### • Nature Video

*Materials:* A video that is designed to use for relaxation and something on which to play it.<sup>13</sup>

Show the video for a few minutes at the beginning of the session. Lower the lights, encourage the youth to make themselves as comfortable as possible, and strongly encourage them to watch and listen in silence. After a few minutes (long enough for them to relax), stop the video and ask them questions like these:

- How did watching this make you feel?
- Do you remember the last time you were in the woods, at the lake, or in the country? What was it like?
- How do you feel when you hear singing birds, or ocean waves, or rain on the roof? How do you feel when you see the sun breaking through clouds, or a white-tailed deer in the wood?
- Do you think being connected to the created world makes us think about God? Why do you think this might be?
- Why do you think we feel more at peace or more centered when we have been in an encounter with the natural world?

### • Quest for Joy

*Materials:* Copies of the theatre reading "Quest for Joy" (see page 11)

Distribute copies of "Quest for Joy." Explain to the students that a theater reading is like a play, but without costumes and props, and where the players don't memorize the script. Ask for volunteers and assign the parts.<sup>19</sup> Ask the students to begin the readings, keeping the creation story from Genesis 1 in mind.

### • Genesis 1: Movement Interpretation

Tell the class that they are about to do a "movement interpretation" of the creation story in Genesis 1. They will first need to look over the "script" (Genesis 1), and assign roles (such as the "wind from God" in verse 2, the sky, the dry land, and so on). Encourage them to be creative. Give them a few minutes to brainstorm about this. With the class's help, select a student who reads with dramatic flair to be the narrator. Then ask them to perform their interpretation.

Suggested Questions:

- Why do you think the world was created at all, and why was it created in the way it was?
- How does the creation story make you feel about God?
- What does the creation story have to do with us? Does it make you feel that God loves you?
- How did Francis' and Clare's lifestyle help them to be "in touch" with creation?
- How does being close to nature affect the way we see our world?
- Can being re-connected to nature help us to cope with the pressures of our lives?

## C. Activities for Children

### • Cut Off from Nature

*Materials:* Four or five lightweight blankets, a piece of paper and pen, signs made out of cardboard or posterboard that say "Brother Sun," "Sister Moon," "Brother Fire," "Sister Water," etc. (See "The Song to Brother Sun" on the first resource page for this unit for more creature names<sup>14</sup>)

Ask for volunteers to play several parts in a role-play situation. You'll need someone to play the human (make sure it is someone who is not claustrophobic) and several people to play the other creatures. Ask the students to list several things that isolate us from nature. Write these down.<sup>15</sup>

Ask the “human” to stand in the center of a circle made by the “creatures.” Pick up one of the blankets, explaining that it represents air conditioning, and put it over the “human’s” head. Do the same with a second blanket, saying that it represents the noise made by radio and television. Continue until you run out of blankets or elements from the class’s list.

Then ask the “human” how she or he feels. Ask things like:

- *Can you tell that you are surrounded by other creatures?*
- *Do you feel connected to them at all?*

Now take the blankets off, one by one, and keep checking with the “human” with questions like:

- *Is this helping at all?*
- *Are you beginning to sense the presence of the others yet?*

Now discuss with the class how this is similar to our relationship with the created world, with questions like:

- *Is this an accurate picture of how we relate to nature?*
- *In what ways do you think we are cut off from nature?*
- *What does that do to our spiritual health?*

### • **Genesis 1: Mural**

*Materials:* A long sheet of butcher paper, markers of various colors, masking tape

Ask the youth to open their Bibles to Genesis 1. Prepare a long sheet of butcher paper and enough colored markers for each student to be able to draw or write something on the sheet. Attach the sheet to the wall with masking tape and instruct the students to be ready to make an interpretive mural as one or two of them read aloud. They may want to stand at the wall with their Bibles and markers.

Ask the readers to begin. Stop them from time to time as they read, and ask different members of the class to choose a symbol or phrase for each section. For instance, it would be logical to stop at the end of each day in the story—at the end of verse 5, at the end of verse 8, and so on. Then encourage them to draw or write these representations on the sheet. You may want to encourage them to begin at one end and go sequentially to the other end, so that the images tell the story in chronological order.<sup>20</sup>

### • **Genesis 1: Movement Interpretation**

Tell the class that they are about to do a “movement interpretation” of the creation story in Genesis

1. They will first need to look over the “script” (Genesis 1), and assign roles (such as the “wind from God” in verse 2, the sky, the dry land, and so on. Encourage them to be creative. Give them a few minutes to brainstorm about this. With the class’s help, select a student who reads with dramatic flair to be the narrator. Then ask them to perform their interpretation.

### • **Charting the Order of Creation**

*Materials:* paper and pencil

Ask the youth to open their Bibles to Genesis 1. Tell them that they are going to chart the order of creation in this story. Encourage them to watch for the different movements of the creation process.

Select one student to write their findings on paper. Ask one or more of them to read the passage aloud, and ask the others to listen for mention of each new created element, and to stop the readers when they hear something that should be added to the list. For instance, they will begin with light, and then go on to the sky, and so on. Ask them to group these elements into the six “days” of creation.

As they read and listen, talk to the students about what this story tells about God—how the world was created to be delightful, to be pleasing to its inhabitants. When they have finished with their “creation chart,” ask them to count the verses where God takes stock of the created things and pronounces them to be good.

Suggested questions:

- *Why do you think the world was created at all, and why was it created in the way it was?*
- *How does the creation story make you feel about God?*
- *What does the creation story have to do with us? Does it make you feel that God loves you?*

## *D. Closing Activities for Youth and/or Children*

### • **The Earth Pact**

*Materials:* A copy of the “The Earth Pact” (see page 12) and a way to display it in your classroom (tape, thumbtacks, etc.)

Produce a copy of “The Earth Pact” and ask one of the students to read it aloud. Then pass it around for the students to sign. Tell them that, if they sign, they are agreeing to hold each other accountable for doing what they can to re-connect themselves



to nature. Then ask one of the students to lead in a closing prayer for guidance in this new endeavor.

### • A Quiet Moment with a Hymn

*Materials:* A hymnal or a copy of “For the Beauty of the Earth”

Ask the students to close their eyes and listen quietly while you read “For the Beauty of the Earth.” Read all of the verses. It might be effective to have someone play the hymn quietly while you read. (*Chris Rice has an album of piano hymns that includes this song.*) This could serve as the benediction for the session.

### • The Creation According to Modern Music

*Materials:* A recording of one of the following songs: “Creation Dream” by Bruce Cockburn (on the *Dancin’ in the Dragon’s Jaws* album), “Lord of the Starfields” by Bruce Cockburn (on the *In the Falling Dark* album), or “Morning Has Broken” by Cat Stevens<sup>22</sup> (on the *Teaser and the Firecat* album)

Play “Creation Dream” or “Lord of the Starfields” by Bruce Cockburn, or “Morning Has Broken” by Cat Stevens and ask the students to listen with their eyes closed. These songs will show the youth that praise of creation and the Creator are not just in old hymns, but has been written and recorded by people in more recent decades and for secular markets. (You might find your own song to use instead of one of these. Rich Mullins’ “I See You” from *The World as Best I See It* would also be good.) It never hurts to show that biblical stories are relevant to modern culture. You could use this as a benediction.

## Endnotes

1. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation from Round River*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1966.

2. *Ibid*, p. xvii.

3. A story that tends to crop up where Francis is discussed is one about his “preaching to birds.” My contention, at this point, is invariably to point out that he was not giving them a “plan of salvation.” Instead, he was singing along with them, rejoicing with them about the beauty of creation and the goodness of God. (See “The First Life of St. Francis” by Thomas of Celano, in Marion A. Habig, ed. *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies, The*

*English Omnibus of Sources for the Life of St. Francis*. Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1972, pp 277-280.)

4. This has been called the first poem written in the Italian language.

5. Walter Brueggemann, “Genesis” from the series *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, edited by James Luther Mays, et al, pp 11-12.

6. Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961, p 45.

7. The second story begins in chapter 2 verse 4b (the first goes through 2:3a), and is most often attributed to Yahwist historians (called so because of the use of the name Yahweh for God), a writer or group of writers from a much earlier time than that of the Priestly writers. The two stories depict the creation events in completely different order and each portrays God’s role in a manner entirely unlike the other. For instance, the first story presents God as “speaking” the world into existence, and the second reflects God kneeling in the clay and molding the man’s body with human-like hands. (See Cuthbert A. Simpson, “The Growth of the Hexateuch,” *The Interpreter’s Bible, Volume I*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952, pp185-200; see also Cuthbert A. Simpson, “Exegesis of Genesis,” *The Interpreter’s Bible, Volume I*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952, pp. 465-466.)

8. Brueggemann, p 24, Von Rad, p 47, Simpson, pp 466-467.

9. *Ibid*, pp 22-23.

10. Simpson, p 467.

11. *Ibid*.

12. Italy was under the rule of the Holy Roman Empire at that time, and the emperor, Otto II of Brunswick, was about to build a road that would destroy the habitat of these birds. (See Habig, *The Omnibus*.)

13. You can find these at your local library or on YouTube. They feature classical or contemplative music and video footage of mountain streams, ocean waves, sunsets, and other natural scenes.

14. You can adapt this idea to your own needs—three or four “creatures” will be enough, but you can have as many as you want. You might also come up with some of your own “creatures.”

15. They may suggest things like air-conditioned



houses, radio and television, cars, or living in the city. You might need to help them think of things, and you may have some good ideas of your own. For purposes of discussion here, we will say that they named the four things mentioned above.

16. There was a thread of festivity that ran through much of Francis' and Clare's lives. Francis once, in fact, picked up two sticks and pretended to play the fiddle—perhaps a precursor of the “air guitar.”

17. As far as I can tell, the criteria in “The Canticle to Brother Sun” for deciding whether a creature is “brother” or “sister” is its gender in the Italian language.

18. You might consider having the finished product typed up nicely, or printed in calligraphy, and displaying it on the wall. They may be slow to admit it, but young people enjoy being reminded of creative things they have done.

19. Make sure READER 1 is a confident reader; that part is much longer than the others. If you have a small class, some of the youth can take two or three parts (except for READER 1.)

20. It may be more natural for the students to work together on all of the symbols, or for each student to work on one. You will be the best judge of that.

21. This sermon/poem is in a collection of Johnson's sermons titled *God's Trombones*.

22. This is actually a centuries-old hymn, updated and given a “blues” touch by Mr. Stevens.

23. A purple candle or a vase with purple flowers would be a nice touch.

## Sources

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*and Preaching*, edited by James Luther Mays, et al.

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8. Farmer, David Hugh. *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.



# The Song to the Sun

written by Francis of Assisi in 1225

## FIRST TEAM:

Most high, Almighty and All-good Lord!  
All blessings, praise, all glory and honor  
are Yours!

## SECOND TEAM:

Only to You, Most High, do they belong,  
And no one is worthy to say Your Name.

## FIRST TEAM:

Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures!  
Sir Brother Sun is the first.  
With him, You give us light of day.

## SECOND TEAM:

For he is beautiful and radiant,  
he is full of splendor;  
He is the symbol of You, Most High!

## FIRST TEAM:

Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Moon  
and all the Stars!  
You placed them in the sky;  
And made them bright and lovely and fair.

## SECOND TEAM:

Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Wind  
and Brother Air,  
Cloudy, clear, and all weather,  
By which You nourish  
all creatures.

## FIRST TEAM:

Be praised, my Lord, for Sister  
Water!  
How useful she is, how humble;  
She is precious and chaste!

## SECOND TEAM:

Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Fire,  
For him, You make bright the dark!  
He is beautiful, he is merry;  
He is powerful and strong!

## FIRST TEAM:

Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Earth!  
She is the mother who governs us  
and gives us food.  
For us, she makes all kinds of fruits;  
All colors of flowers, and sweet herbs.

## SECOND TEAM:

Be praised, my Lord, for those who forgive  
because they love You;  
For those who bear sickness and trials.

## FIRST TEAM:

They are happy, who accept all in peace,  
For they will be crowned by You, Most High!

## SECOND TEAM:

Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Death!  
No mortal can escape her kiss.

## FIRST TEAM:

Woeful are those who die in mortal sin.

## SECOND TEAM:

But happy are those who do Your will.  
For the Second Death will not harm them.

## BOTH TEAMS:

Praise and bless my lord; Thank Him.  
And serve Him with great humility.

*Note: this translation of the "Canticle" is from Francis: The Poor Man of Assisi by Tomie de Paola, New York: Holiday House, 1982. A more traditional translation, closer to the original Italian, can be found in "The Writing of St. Francis," St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies, The English Omnibus of Sources for the Life of St. Francis, edited by Marion A. Habig, Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1972, pp 129-131.*



# Quest for Joy

## A Theater Reading

by Katie Cook

READER 1: I was on a retreat. We were supposed to be meditating about joy, but I was stymied somehow. I wrote in my journal, "What is joy, anyway? Have I ever really known joy? How do I know what it is when I experience it? Is it something you look for?" I sat in my room in the profound silence.

The almost summery sound of night creatures (it was December) greeted me as I emerged from my room, afraid I might miss the sunset. In their song I heard these words:

READER 2: Be at peace. It is twilight, our time, and we want to sing and chirp and croak as the sky burns away. Come, listen to us and watch the wind and sky. Our purpose and delight is to sing in our various ways as the evening fades into night.

READER 1: The trees performed an intricate dance in the wind. The junipers nimbly wove in and out of the stark oak branches, saying,

READER 3: Come, join the dance! Our music is the wind and the song of small creatures, which you must be silent to hear. Our joy is to stand in the sun and rain, and to dance in the wind.

READER 1: The wind romped through the woods and past the buildings, whipping the trees and scattering the brown leaves in the air, saying,

READER 4: Come, feel my presence! I bring changes to the weather. I rattle the windows and doors. I make the trees dance. Feel my movement, and be thankful for fresh winds and rain and storms and cold fronts. Be thankful for the playful caress on your face and through your hair. It is my purpose and my delight simply to blow.

READER 1: Beyond the naked oak fingers, the dark blue of the sky turned to an advent pastel. The horizon burned with hot orange and a blush of pink. The trailing wisps of cloud above caught the pastel shades. The colors shouted behind the black silhouettes of winter-bare branches, saying,

READER 5: Come, burn with us! Our last slow goodbye to the day will soon make way to the dance of the stars. Come, drink in the colors! Our joy is to burn up the sky with glory.

READER 1: The raindrops fell as I sat, watching and listening. Quietly pattering, they fell around me and on me, spotting my glasses, saying,

READER 6: We fall onto the earth to moisten the dry ground and to nourish growing things. We can fall gently, or we can rage down in terrifying sheets of water. We can patter on your roof, or fill the streams to swelling point, covering the roads, flooding the houses. Our voice is sometimes still and small, and it is sometimes thunderous. It is our delight and our purpose simply to fall upon the earth.

READER 1: Back inside the lodge, a fire was roaring in the chimney, as if to say,

READER 7: Look at my colors, watch my ever-moving tongues. I consume the sweet cedar wood and then vanish. It is my delight to murmur and chatter and crackle noisily while sending up my flames like prayers.

READER 1: As I listened to the fire, a footnote in the Jerusalem Bible caught my attention. There I read that the vocation (calling) of the human race is simply to be the children of God.

"So that is where joy comes from," I thought. "That is what joy is about."

My purpose and my delight is simply to be a child of God. When my steps come closer to that place where I am what I was created to be, when my struggles and strivings turn into the simple and natural song that I heard from other creatures that day, when I begin to know who I am as they know who they are, then I will encounter and experience that elusive emotion we call joy.

*Written in 1992 at Cedar Brake Retreat Center in Belton, Texas. —lkc*



# The Earth Pact

We, *the undersigned*, having been inspired by the creation story in Genesis chapter one, and by the lives of Francis and Clare of Assisi, saints of the thirteenth century,

and being of sound minds, do hereby make together this pact:

We promise to look around us every day and notice the beauties of nature.

We promise to turn off our phones, radios, stereos, television sets, air conditioners, and other noisemakers long enough to hear the singing of birds and other creatures.

We promise to be more reverent to the earth and refrain from trashing it.

We promise to look upon our fellow creatures with more compassion and siblinghood, and to treat them with kindness.

We promise to hold each other accountable for these promises.

Signed on this day, \_\_\_\_\_,

by the \_\_\_\_\_ class of \_\_\_\_\_ Church:



Art by Rebecca S. Ward