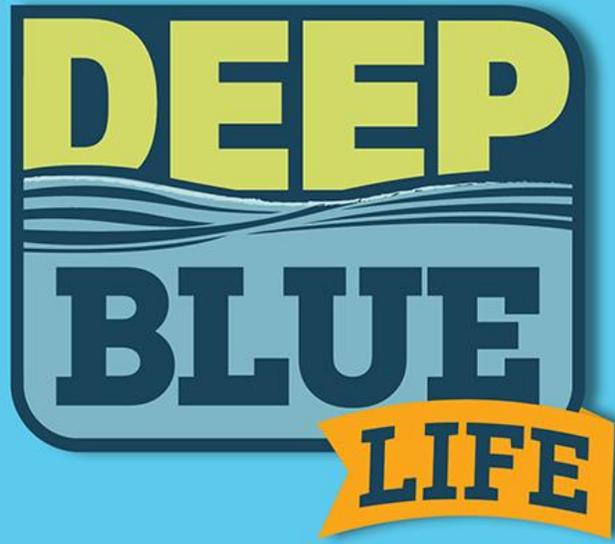


Cloud of Witnesses



Francis
of Assisi



Cloud of Witnesses: Francis of Assisi

Main Idea

God invites us to learn from and care for God's creation.

BIBLE CONNECTIONS

Matthew 6:25-34

Therefore, I say to you, don't worry about your life, what you'll eat or what you'll drink, or about your body, what you'll wear. Isn't life more than food and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds in the sky. They don't sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you worth much more than they are? Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? Notice how the lilies in the field grow. They don't wear themselves out with work, and they don't spin cloth. But I say to you that even Solomon in all of his splendor wasn't dressed like one of these. If God dresses grass in the field so beautifully, even though it's alive today and tomorrow it's thrown into the furnace, won't God do much more for you, you people of weak faith? Therefore, don't worry and say, "What are we going to eat?" or "What are we going to drink?" or "What are we going to wear?" Gentiles long for all these things. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them. Instead, desire first and foremost God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, stop worrying about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

BACKGROUND FOR LEADERS

Hebrews 11 tells the stories of people of faith throughout the Bible, offering encouragement to the original audience that they can step forward in faith surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. In the creeds of the church, we profess belief in the "communion of saints." These are both ways of saying how important our foremothers and forefathers of faith are to our own relationships with God. Their

stories offer wisdom for living, inspiration and encouragement, and a sense of spiritual companionship.

St. Francis of Assisi started out as a wealthy Italian merchant's son, enjoying the lavish things in life, like big parties and fancy clothes. He went to war as a knight of Assisi and was transformed by the suffering he experienced as a prisoner of war. When Francis returned home, he received a call from God while he was praying. He heard God telling him to restore the church, and this prompted a spiritual journey toward simplicity, justice, prayer, and the care of creation. Francis founded the Catholic order of Franciscans, an order or group of people and communities that live by the values of creating community, showing compassion, reverence of creation, and peacemaking.

GATHERING ACTIVITY

Nature Walk

This is a great activity no matter where you're walking. Whether you're walking down a city sidewalk or around a field and forest, there is nature to be seen!

Say: Today we're going to go for a walk outside, and we're going to pay special attention as we go. We often walk just to get from one place to the next, but for this walk, we are going to walk quietly and pay close attention. Keep your eyes, ears, and noses alert to experience nature around you. See if you can spot any plants and creatures.

After the walk, **ask:** What did you notice? Did you see any creatures? plants? What was the weather like? Did this walk feel any different from other walks you've taken?

STORY CONNECTION

Say: Today we're going to learn about St. Francis, a man who paid close attention to nature all around him and worshipped God by caring for all created things. When Francis was young, he had all the good things money could buy. He wore fancy clothes, threw big parties, and went on big vacations. But as he grew up, Francis felt like something was missing. He began to pray to God and pay attention to small things in the world around him. Francis began to befriend all kinds of animals, showing them gentleness and patience to earn the animals' trust. One day he was out in nature, and an entire flock of birds gathered on the ground before him and even perched on his head and shoulders. Francis felt called to preach the gospel to the birds. As the story goes, Francis encouraged them to praise God in every beat of their wings and note of their singing, and thanked them for the example that Jesus saw in this parable: "Look at the birds in

TIP: Telling the story in a calm, smooth voice will draw the children into the story.

the sky. They don't sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them."

PRACTICE AND REFLECTION

Questions for Discussion

Ask: How do you think it would feel to look up and have all kinds of birds gathered around you? Have you ever had a special encounter with an animal, or noticed something wonderful in nature?

Prayer of Blessing

Pray: Dear God, thank you for St. Francis, a witness to your glory and your compassion. Like Francis, help us pay attention and offer tenderness to other people and to all creation. Amen.

Caring for Animals

Ask: Do you have a pet or a favorite animal? What do you like about this animal? Is there anything about this creature that is difficult to like?

Say: Use art supplies to draw or collage a picture of this animal.

After everyone has finished their pictures, lead a simple prayer.

Pray: Dear God, thank you for your amazing and diverse creatures. Help us to respect each animal and to be faithful caretakers for all creatures. Amen.

Hymn

Sing "His Eye Is on the Sparrow" (*The Faith We Sing* 2146) from *The Faith We Sing*. You could also search online for a video of this song.

Illustrate the Cantic of the Sun

Invite the children to read this adapted version of the "Cantic of the Sun" aloud. Pause to clarify any words that might be unfamiliar.

*We praise you, Lord, for all your creatures, especially for our Brother Sun,
who brings the day. You give us light through him.
And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor!
Every day he reminds us of you.*

*We praise you, Lord, for our Sister Moon
and our Sister Stars. In heaven you formed them,
clear and precious and beautiful.*

Supplies:

- Art supplies
- Paper

Supplies:

- Copies of *The Faith We Sing*

Supplies:

- Art supplies
- Paper
- Tape or glue
- Mural paper

*We praise you, Lord, for Brother Wind,
and for Brother Air, cloudy and serene.
In every kind of weather,
you take care of your creatures.*

*We praise you, Lord, for Sister Water;
she is very useful and humble and precious and pure.*

*We praise you, Lord, for Brother Fire,
through whom you light the night. He is beautiful
and playful and robust and strong.*

*We praise you, Lord, for our sister Mother Earth,
who sustains us and governs us and who provides
varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs.*

Give each child a piece of paper and art supplies. Invite the children to each choose a verse of the poem to illustrate.

Tape or glue the children's illustrations to a piece of mural paper. Place the illustrations in the order they appear in the prayer. Write across the top of the banner "Canticle of the Sun." Hang the banner in your group space.

Send home the "Reflecting at Home" sheet on page 5 with each child. This will help engage the whole family in this spiritual practice together.

REFLECTING AT HOME

Today your child learned about St. Francis of Assisi, who paid close attention to nature and offered tender care to every creature. If you have a pet at home, let the care of your animal be a reminder to slow down, pay attention, and steward the creatures of the earth. If you don't have a pet at home, consider taking an outing to feed ducks or squirrels in the park, or put up a bird feeder with your child.

FURTHER READING

In our story of Creation, God made all that is and put the creatures and plants of the earth into the care of human beings. Read this story, found in Genesis 1, to learn more.