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Dear Friends,

**All Things Bright and Beautiful** Every year on October 4 at St. Elizabeth's we observe the Feast of Francis of Assisi. Francis, though born to a wealthy merchant family, struggled with his sense of identity and purpose. In a time when few were wealthy, he did not find a sense of peace or stability until he embraced exactly what most were trying to escape: poverty, dependence, and uncertainty—at least as the culture understood those terms. Francis' paradox was that in poverty he found wealth; in dependence, freedom; and in uncertainty, security—he looked to God rather than to his own resources and found that the more he gave up, the more he received. Think of it as extreme uncluttering.

**If you give a monk a pocket....**There are many stories about Francis which suggest he might have been a very difficult companion. (It was not until recently that members of his religious order were permitted to wear habits with a pocket. Francis believed that once a monk had a pocket, he would look for things to put in it....) But as austere as Francis was about finances, he is also responsible for a radical reorientation in our thinking about Jesus and the relationship between God and creation.

In his journey into the riches of poverty, Francis discovered the glory of God in the common elements of creation. At a time when many seemed to think that to be holy an object had to be covered with gold, Francis saw the holiness of God in ordinary animals, in the daily events of life, and in ordinary people.

**Francis and Little Lord Jesus** Francis died in 1226. The next time you go to a major art museum with a good medieval collection, look at how the baby Jesus and his mother are represented before 1200, and then look at how they appear not long after that date. In most instances, before Francis, Jesus appears as a miniature adult, often dressed like an emperor, often standing upright, often with his right hand held up as if he were giving some priestly blessing. Mary often is in the background, often austere, with a facial expression which seems more regal than maternal. But not long after 1200 Jesus begins to appear as a human baby, and Mary as a human mother. Jesus is held against her breast, and often is leaning against it. His clothes are what a baby might wear, and Mary may be looking, as a mother, at him, and not staring out at us like an empress dowager. Jesus is not a mini-emperor, he is a human child.

Whether Francis caught the spirit of his age or whether he ignited it, I do not know. But for me Francis draws together a wide network of ideas of God and creation which continue to inspire and instruct us today. The ecological movement of our time comes as no surprise to one familiar with Francis—if creation is the glorious work of a holy God, how could we treat it with anything other than respect and affection?

**A stable vision for the Church** As far as we can tell, Francis invented the Christmas Pageant. Whether he was actually the first, I cannot guarantee, but Francis certainly raised the profile of the “stable” aspect of the birth of Jesus. Francis brought animals into the church—not costumed children but actual farm animals—to remind everyone that when God came to us, it was not in a sanitized, incense-filled holy space filled with people in their best attire. Francis’ message may be shocking, or even offensive, at first, but then it is eye-opening, liberating, and festively joyous.

On St. Francis Day itself, we invite the animals of our neighborhood and our parish to gather at the church at 4:00 pm for a blessing. We have a brief liturgy which includes elements of scripture to remind us that we are manifesting God’s intent and not simply doing something festive of our own devising. And our prayers remind us that in the faithfulness and loving constancy of our animal companions, we may see something of God more clearly than in some of our human contacts. Basically, God may be, in some important respects, more like your dog than your Rector....

**Dogmatics and Catechism** Certainly cats have their place in all this, and I confess to warming significantly to our neighborhood felines as our chipmunk population has exploded. But dogs are going to be my focus for a moment.

**Dog Tales** Two dogs have shared in the preaching at St. Elizabeth’s. Mulligan Falck (recently in residence at the Rectory for a week in September) broke the species barrier at an Easter morning Family Service some years ago as she charged down the center aisle in response to being called by name by then-teenage Sarah Falck (who now works for Google and is getting her MBA from NYU). The exchange echoed the Easter gospel story of Mary’s suddenly realizing, before she even understood, that the one talking to her in the garden on that first Easter was one whom she knew and loved.

Once Jesus called Mary by name, everything began to make sense to her. Before Sarah stood up from behind the altar, Mulligan was a few steps in from the narthex, looking around uncertainly at all the people, and wondering why she was there. But when she heard her name, and recognized the voice of the one calling her, her anxiety and uncertainty vanished and she bounded with infectious joy the length of the church in a matter of seconds. Nothing I could have said in the pulpit could have illustrated the power of being called by name by Jesus.

Some years later Thandi Brundige, another Golden Retriever, also assisted with two sermons. In one, Thandi and I explored how God’s will for us is not unlike a leash—it may not always be what we would choose, but it exists to keep us safe, to keep us connected to one who loves and cares for us, and to get us home when we might otherwise run helter-skelter. Running might be fun at first, but then we look around and wonder where we are and how we got there.

This past 4<sup>th</sup> of July Susan and I, and our son Andrew were having dinner with the Brundiges prior to walking up to Crest Road to look out over the valley and see the fireworks not only in Ridgewood, but all the way to those rising up from New York City. Thandi had never shown signs of discomfort with fireworks, and we brought her with us. And as we were standing around with the crowd in the street, she greeted those of all ages, was petted by children and adults alike, and delighted in the festive atmosphere.

But when the first fireworks exploded, her mood changed in an instant. She promptly slipped her collar and bolted, and Bob Brundige immediately set out after her.

I imagined that she would simply run back home—we had walked over and the distance was not far. The ability of dogs to find their way home is legendary, and I had every confidence that Thandi could take care of herself.

At the end of the fireworks the rest of us walked back to the Brundiges' house, but neither Thandi nor Bob were there. Susan, Andrew, and I drove the short distance back to the Rectory, and I, on a hunch, went down the garden stairs to see if Thandi had found her way to St. Elizabeth's.

Kay Brundige is a regular member of our Morning Prayer congregation and serves as our leader on Fridays. And over the last few months Kay had often brought Thandi into that service (where she would join Lilly Hermance, and occasionally Lilly's cousin, Max Spahr, two of our other canines in regular attendance). At first Thandi was not sure about all this standing and sitting, and wondered why, when I was leading, I was paying more attention to my book than to her. But she quickly caught on, and might check in briefly with each member of the congregation, and then return to sit in the aisle next to Kay near the back of the room. And when we all got up at the end, Thandi would get up, too, and join in the post-service greeting and conversation.

Lilly Hermance, a black lab lacking only a white collar to be in full clerical dress, has taken the participation one step further: at the end of the service Lilly, a senior dog, pulls herself up, walks up to the altar, and leads the procession down the center aisle to the back of the room. We all had high hopes that Thandi would learn to follow Lilly's example.

So, because of Thandi's familiarity with St. Elizabeth's—and she would often visit on occasions other than services—I wondered if, on that 4<sup>th</sup> of July, she might have come here.

So I walked down the stairs from my back yard to the Chapel door. It was dark, and when I looked by the light of my flashlight and the illumination from the outside sconces, my first thought was that some kids had thrown a bottle of some red drink or some red paint at the door. I was surprised, but it was the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, spirits were running high, and the West Walkway is a major pedestrian thoroughfare between Fairmount Road and California Street and the Willard fields.

But when I looked closer, it became all too clear that what I was looking at was neither a drink nor paint. There was a pool at the base of the Chapel door, there were marks on the door up to the window, and there were chillingly clear footprints, in the same dark red color, leading from the West Walkway to the door itself. The substance was unmistakably blood, and there was a lot of it.

I saw the trail of paw prints leading to the door, but there were no prints leading away. I looked under the bushes, but there was nothing there. Alex von Summer came by with his dog on their night walk, and I shared my concern with him. He had seen nothing and joined in the search, but we found nothing. And, while we were looking, Andrew came down the stairs to say that Bob had just called, and that Thandi had, in fact, died where I was standing.

Young neighbors walking through, far from doing any damage, had seen Thandi's body at the door and promptly called the police. They could not have been more helpful or conscientious. Bob had been in touch with the police earlier, and they passed the word they received from our neighbors to him. Bob came, took Thandi to the Animal Hospital, but she had already completed her much too short time with us.

I had assumed that she had been hit by a car. But the next day Bob backtracked the paw prints from St. Elizabeth's, and Thandi had made her way about 1.6 miles from where the blood began before she got to the church. There had been no evident trauma to her body and, though bleeding heavily, she was still able to walk quite a distance. We will probably never know the technical cause of death. Maybe she was hit, maybe the combination of heat, a pounding heart, and running heavily prompted an already weak blood vessel to burst catastrophically in her lungs. We will never know.

But what we do know is that when she knew she was in trouble, she found her way to the church. Her prints showed that she first came from Morningside Road onto California Street and then went straight to the main doors right by the parking lot. When she could not get in, she went around to the Chapel door that she and Kay had often used for Morning Prayer. There was evidence that she jumped up on the door, repeatedly, in hopes of getting in. When that failed, she went out onto the metal grating over the window well and came to the large plate glass window that is opposite the entrance to the Chapel and the stained glass window of Jesus feeding the 5,000. Thandi jumped once or twice there, and then made her way back, more slowly, to the Chapel door. As far as I can tell, there she lay down one last time, and breathed her last.

**If only we were the Kingdom** It made sense on all sorts of levels that she would come to the church. Every time she had been there she had been welcomed, indeed celebrated, given a treat, offered water, and attended to in every respect. She may be forgiven for not realizing that at 10:00 pm on the Fourth of July, things might not be as she had always experienced them.

One of the heartbreaking differences between the Church and the actual Kingdom of God is that in the Kingdom someone coming in distress to a door will always find it open. There will be no jumping in vain, or going from one door to another in the increasingly desperate effort to get in. Knock, and it will be opened, and if knocking is not an option, I suspect it will open just as you approach. And through that open door will be welcome and healing and restoration to wholeness and fellowship and to relief from pain, distress, and anxiety. There, it will not be dark but light, and there we will not see a stained glass Jesus surrounded by stained glass children and adults, but the man, the God, himself, and gathered around him, those who have gone through their own great tribulations and are now healed and at peace.

You may think what you want, but I imagine that at the end Thandi found that the real door, the door through which we will all pass, had opened. In our funeral services, we often read the passage from the Gospel of John in which Jesus tells his anxious and troubled followers, “I am the way.” Elsewhere in that same Gospel he also tells them (as the King James Translation has it), “I am the door.” And when he says that, I do not think he intends people—or dogs—to imagine a door that is closed.

It wasn’t in this life, but in the moment Thandi left us and returned to the God who brought all life into being, I imagine that she heard her name called, and called by one whom she had always known and one whom she knew had always loved her. Sometimes I wonder if dogs, unlike us, never lose the ability to hear and recognize that voice throughout their lives. I suspect Francis might have had a similar thought.

The dog who gallops down the aisle in a Sunday sermon, and the one who comes at the end to finish her days at the house of the Lord—perhaps these creatures have been sent to us so that we might see something of God which we would otherwise miss. Sometimes they are shepherds, and sometimes they are retrievers, but they are always messengers—angels, prophets, pastors—of a God who uses all of creation to show forth his glory, his love, and his faithfulness. May the insights of Francis of Assisi be ours this month, and may we see in the wonders of creation hints of the much more wonderful Creator whose work and proclamation it is.

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*Rector*