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Texts: Psalm 8; John 15:5, a-c; Canticle of the Creatures by St. Francis of Assisi

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Ode to a Trembling Giant and Other Inconceivable Surprises

In a minute, we're going to enter another world. I invite you to sit back and take a breath and listen as deeply as you can to the audio recording...I promise you it's from somewhere beautiful and unexpected. Ready?

(Bob plays 40 sec sound clip of Pando forest.¹)

Any guesses as to what you've just listened to? A scuba dive into the deep, white noise, birds singing in my backyard? Those are the sounds of a rainy morning in an ancient forest of Aspens in South Central Utah, home to what just might be the largest tree organism in the world. Called Pando (meaning "I Spread") this "Trembling Giant" is pictured on the cover of our bulletin. It's much more than just your pretty grove of green leaves whistling in the wind and rain.²

When I heard this soundtrack on Science Friday in my car a few weeks ago, I had to pull over and listen to the sweet calming vibrations of tree trunks and leaves coming from Pando. According to scientists, Pando is an Aspen clone with 47,000 genetically identical branches that look like separate trees but are connected by one single root system spanning over 106 acres in Fishlake National Forest, in South Central Utah. Audio engineers recently recorded the ancient forest as part of an ongoing study of this extraordinary ecosystem.

Researchers together with the US Forest Service made Pando's remarkable discovery very recently, in 2008. So, you think that the Copper Beech tree in your yard is old? Pando is dated somewhere around 8-12,000 years old.

Writes the poet, Joyce Kilmer, I think that I shall never see a poem as lovely as a tree."

At a time when the skies and the news are filled with the smoke of burning forests, when a drive through Vermont last weekend reveals catastrophic damage to homes from recent flooding of rivers... at a time when climate breakdown is a disturbing reality for much of the world, learning about these Trembling Giants of Aspens reminds me of the beauty that inspires, (saves us) and a world that is that is worth saving.

In Peter Wollstein's new book: *The Power of Trees*, he writes of the ancient forests and how that "The future of forests and the future of humanity are inextricably entwined." Branches on the same tree. Pando is our kin and her health is our health. As our Lakota friends in Green Grass would say, "*Mitakeye Oyasin*", *We are all Kin*.

Sang the poet of our Psalm 8 today speaks to God and says, "how vast is your signature over all the earth....You have encompassed us with glory and splendor."

¹ <https://www.ecosystemsound.com/recordings>

² Friends of Pando: www.friendsofpando.org

On Thursday night about twenty of us gathered here in Sheffield Auditorium to watch a film screening of a powerful documentary called *The Letter* about Pope Francis' extraordinary encyclical, *Laudate Si*, written in 2015. Carleen arranged it through Interfaith Power and Light. The film highlighted the Pope's desire to write the world a letter about care for the earth and one another. It is a moral document and as Pope Francis' said, the "cries of the poor and the cries of the earth can no longer go unheeded."³

The film focuses on the stories of 5 people from various places around the world who are invited to Rome to have a conversation with the Pope about climate change and its impact on their unique lives. The pope calls these visitors his Social poets. Their powerful stories included a climate refugee from Senegal who represents the poor of the world facing the onslaught of environmental catastrophes wrought by climate crisis. There are two marine biologists from Hawaii who study the coral reefs, a fearless young teenage activist from India and an Indigenous environmental leader of the Maró territory in the Brazilian Amazon.

These strangers come together to meet with the Pope in Rome and also visit Assisi, home of Saint Francis of Assisi and the gardens where he wrote his famous *Canticle of Creatures*, another ancient psalm that reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs Us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs".

The movie brought back my experiences on sabbatical last year when I was privileged to spend 10 days in Assisi walking in the footsteps of St Francis. Saint Francis was a mystic, naturalist and poet well ahead of his time. Francis saw creation as God's book of love and believed that nature was God's mirror. He called animals and creatures his siblings, something our writer of Psalm 8 would certainly agree with.

St. Francis had a complicated early life of privilege before his conversion to help the poor and walk away from his father's riches. One of seven children born in Assisi in 1181, he had a traumatic relationship with his overbearing father. Nonetheless, he was a passionate poet, an Italian warrior, a knight of some wealth and a ladies man who enjoyed lavish parties.

As a young soldier, Francis became a prisoner of war and it's thought that the year he was incarcerated influenced his conversion and ultimate call to renounce all possessions and property, serve the poor and found the Franciscan Order. Peering through the arched window of the monastery where Francis lived into the garden below, it was easy for me to see the sources of Francis' inspiration.

Of all the words attributed to St. Francis though, I'm most drawn to this one: "If God can work through me, God can work through anyone."

It's anxiety producing though isn't it? The increasing signs of our planet in distress and the heat waves and warming oceans across the globe just this week alone... The Climate crisis affects every aspect of our lives and yet seems so cosmic in size and scope it can be paralyzing. How do we respond, how can anything we do really make a difference?

³ <https://youtu.be/I3EBHebH17Y>

Here at FCCOL, we're seeking more ways that we as a community of faith and justice can respond in our neck of the woods. There are many needs and injustices to respond to. Watching this film and reading recommended books are just a part of the journey. We do hope you'll get an opportunity to see it, and be a part of the ongoing conversation as individuals and as a community... There is lots to do... letters to write to our legislators and dates to put on the calendar like the upcoming Climate March in NYC City in September.

At the same time, there's something essential and restorative about immersing oneself in beauty along the path whether listening to the beauty of the Pando Forest in Utah, walking on a local beach at low tide, or holding hands with a child you love... all these feed the taproot of wonder and reverence our souls need, desperately need in order to face this time we're living in.

These taproots of faith and wonder, prayer and community are the deep sources we can cultivate—must cultivate—in order to keep our sense of awe alive even in the midst of the hard realities.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel wrote about the praying heart seeking solace... and saw prayer as a home for the soul in the world. Heschel said that "To pray is to take notice of the wonder, to regain a sense of the mystery that animates all beings, the divine margin in all attainments. Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living."⁴

Whatever prayer or sense of reverence that may form on your lips, whether through a psalm or a conversation or a film or a walk in the woods, May you remember that we're in this together. May you find a way to sit more often under the cooling shade of a leafy tree in your backyard and enter what one writer calls, "Tree Time."⁵

Pretty soon, after about 20 minutes you'll sense the soul in every dragonfly and beetle and sunflower near you. Pretty soon you'll even feel the anger toward your neighbor melting away... and feel your breath moving in and out of your very human body, reminding you of what can save/refresh the beleaguered heart. Still on Tree Time (or Pando Time) you'll give thanks for today's "inconceivable surprises of living."

Praised be You, my Lord, with all your creatures; especially Brother Sun, who is the day, and through whom You give us light (adapted from *Canticle of the Creatures* by St. Francis of Assisi, 1225).

Amen.

⁴ Quote from the foreword to *The Complete Psalms* by Pamela Greenberg, (2010).

⁵ Sumana Roy, *How I Became a Tree*, (2017).