

Brother Wind

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, October 4, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [John 3:1-8](#) and the [Canticle of the Sun](#)

Copyright © 2026 by Jeffrey S. Spencer

Today is the Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi, and it is the last day of the Season of Creation. That is no accident. St. Francis is famous for his love of and relationship with the created world. Beginning on September 1, the Feast of St. Francis is an appropriate day to conclude this relatively new season in the liturgical calendar, so new that only a minority of churches mark it as a season.

The Feast of Creation (sometimes called the Feast of Creation in Christ) is much more widely recognized within Christianity and is held on September 1 (or the first Sunday after September 1). I don't mind being part of the minority that give creation a whole season, a full five weeks. And I love it when the calendar is such that October 4 falls on a Sunday and we get to conclude the season on St. Francis's feast day. Today also happens to be the 800th anniversary of his death.

My mother was the person who introduced me to St. Francis. She didn't do it on purpose. She had a printed version of a prayer that is known as "The Prayer of St. Francis," though it's very unlikely that he is the author. It was in a picture frame in my older sister's bedroom and one evening when I was being an annoying little brother, I read it and asked what it means to "sow love" (pronouncing "sow" like the word a female pig). My mother must have been in the room, because I remember her explaining that the word is "sow," like sowing a seed, meaning planting a seed. I fell in love with the prayer.

I came back to this prayer in high school and found it had been forming my faith, my relationship with the Holy One. "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love." "O Divine Master grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love." It was like a personal mission statement that this self-absorbed adolescent needed to help him get outside himself.

After my mother died and my father had fallen in love again and was planning to get married, he needed to ready his house to be put on the market. My siblings and I gathered back in the house and divided up the things that our dad didn't want to take to the condo he and my step-mother were buying. In college, my mother had majored in studio arts, focusing on painting. Post-college, she worked in the field, hand painting lampshades for an interior designer, and at a lithographic printing company. And then she married and started having kids and I think we got in the way of her artistic career. That said, she did continue to design and silkscreen-print two Christmas Card each year – one for my parents to send and one from her sister and brother-in-law to send. And over the years, she did manage to keep her hand in art in other ways.

All this meant that there was art she had made over the years that needed to be divided up, and one of the pieces was a calligraphy she did of the Prayer of St. Francis. I

ended up with it, and I brought it in to share it. It's hanging in the back of the sanctuary today.

I probably wasn't introduced to the "Canticle of the Sun" for another five or ten years. As Liz pointed out in her introduction to it, the Canticle is considered "the first great poem in Italian."¹ Knowing that it is sometimes called the Canticle of the Creatures, it sometimes feels to me like Francis left out a whole bunch of siblings. Francis had a reputation for preaching to the animals and plants when he didn't find people to preach to. So I kind of expect Francis to include all the plants and animals in his invitation to join in the chorus of praise of the Creator.

Instead, in this poem, Francis is focused more cosmically. He invites "Brother Sun" and "Sister Moon," "Brother Fire" and "Sister Water," as well as "Sister Earth our Mother" to join him in praising God.

I know that many, many indigenous peoples in what is now called North America considered plant and animal species as "people" in their own right and all "people" as kin.² I expect Francis to include these less cosmopolitan kin in his invitation to praise God. And these days I wish had explicitly included them. I think we need the awareness of our being part of creation even more now than humanity did in the 12th century. The built world is becoming more and more built and more and more separate from the created world, and as our dwelling in the ever-more-built world makes it easier and easier to forget that we are part of the create world, we need to call the sun and the moon and the stars our siblings. We need to call the four elements of fire, water, air, and earth our siblings. And we need to call all creatures bright and beautiful, and all creatures dull and ugly our siblings. Perhaps if we called the rest of creation our siblings, we might see them more clearly that way, And if we saw the rest of creation more clearly as our siblings we would be less likely to treat them as a resource to be exploited.

The stanza of the Canticle that caught my attention for this week is the one that says, "Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind, and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather through which You give sustenance to Your creatures." "In the Bible, there is often an equivalence between wind and spirit: indeed, in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, they are the same word – *ruah*, *pneuma*, and *spiritus*, respectively."³

In the first creation story in Genesis, the *ruah* of God moves over the waters when God creates the heavens and the earth. It is up to the reader (or the translator) to decide if *ruah* here means the "spirit" of God or the "wind" of God. In the second creation story in Genesis, God blows the *ruah* of life into the mud creature. It is up to the reader (or the translator) to decide if *ruah* here means the "spirit" of life, the "wind" of life, or the "breath" of life. In the second chapter of the book of Acts, when Luke tells the story of Pentecost and

¹ Jack Wintz, OFM, "St. Francis and His Canticle of the Creatures," *Franciscan Media*, <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/st-anthony-messenger/st-francis-and-his-canticle-of-the-creatures/> (posted February 2018; accessed 3 October 2026).

² See, for instance, Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2020).

³ Michael P. Foley, "St. Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of the Sun*: Brother Wind and the Air," *New Liturgical Movement*, https://www.newliturgicalmovement.org/2025/12/st-francis-of-assis-canticle-of-sun_01326631388.html (posted 26 December 2025; accessed 3 October 2026).

the birth of the church, he says that the room where the disciples gathered was filled with a noise like the rush of a mighty *pneuma*, so loud the noise filled the whole house, and that the disciples were gifted with the Holy *Pneuma*. We are left with the task of figuring out when *pneuma* is referring to the “wind” and when it’s referring to the “Spirit.” And when the story of the gift of the Spirit coming upon the disciples is told in the gospel of John, it happens when Jesus breathes the *pneuma* on them – which might mean his “breath” or it might mean his “spirit.” Which brings us to today’s gospel lesson.

I think Nicodemus was looking for some help, help that he thought he might get from Jesus. So he went to Jesus, perhaps, as John Shelby Spong put it, “against his better judgment.”⁴ He came to Jesus at night. Does the gospel’s author include that detail to tell us the Nicodemus is in the dark? Or perhaps this detail is included simply to suggest that Nicodemus doesn’t want to get caught associating with Jesus?

When Nicodemus comes to Jesus, “he acknowledges that Jesus must somehow be related to God, for only if God were working through [Jesus] could [Jesus] do the ‘signs’ that he did.”⁵ Now, remember we’re only at chapter three of John’s gospel, and the only “sign” that Jesus has performed that the gospel writer has mentioned is the one at the wedding feast in Cana when he transformed water into wine. That story is in chapter two. Nonetheless, this one sign we know about (and perhaps others we don’t know about) are enough to convince Nicodemus that he can find whatever it is he’s looking for from Jesus.

But did you notice that Nicodemus never says what he’s looking for, that he never asks Jesus a question? He acknowledges that Jesus is a rabbi (as is Nicodemus, so this is a conversation among equals), and Jesus immediately says, “No one can see the realm of God without being born from above.” It seems to me like a non-sequitur. I guess it wasn’t to Nicodemus – though he doesn’t understand what Jesus said.

The wordplay gets lost in translation. The Greek here is *anōthen*. “No one can see the realm of God without being born *anōthen*.” *Anōthen* can mean both again and from above, and Nicodemus hears Jesus saying “again,” rather than “from above.” That’s why Nicodemus thinks what Jesus is saying is preposterous. “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Nicodemus asks.

Jesus gets that Nicodemus doesn’t get what Jesus is saying. Jesus tries again. “No one can enter the realm of God without being born of water and spirit. What is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of spirit and spirit.” It’s easy to hear this as some sort of reference, perhaps obscure, to baptism, and thus to “a decision to accept Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior,” as Evangelical Christians would typically put it. Spong says that this is a misreading of the text. I agree with him.

“To be born of water is simply to be born into the life of this world, a process achieved in the breaking of the maternal waters. To be born of the spirit is to step into a

⁴ John Shelby Spong, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2013), 86.

⁵ *Ibid.*

new dimension of what it means to be human. John makes that abundantly clear in the next sentence when he has Jesus say: 'that which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the spirit is spirit.' Then Jesus identifies the spirit with the mystery of the wind 'that blows where it will and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or where it goes' (John 3:8)."⁶

Of course, this is also word play because the *pneuma* Jesus talks about could also be read as "spirit." The Spirit 'blows where it will and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or where it goes.'

I guess I have a bone to pick with Jesus. I *do* understand where the wind comes from and where it's going. Scientifically speaking, the wind is caused by the sun's uneven heating of the earth and by the earth's rotation. It's coming from warm places and moving to cool places. I understand that.

Yet, when I stand in the wind, when I experience the wind, I don't think about that at all. When I'm not being busy and allow myself to truly notice the wind, I feel it. I experience it. It seems almost alive to me, not the simple result of scientifically explainable forces. It blows where it will, coming from wherever it comes from, going to wherever it's headed.

This happens to me when I immerse myself in just about any aspect of nature. When I give myself the space to not be busy and truly notice creation, when I allow myself to truly dwell in God's creation, I can be awed. Sometimes it's as simple as pausing where I am looking up at the hills. Sometimes it's as simple as looking at the sky and noticing the clouds or noticing the sunset (I'm not typically up early enough to notice the sunrise), or noticing the moon (or the moon's absence).

So, Brother Wind, keep on praising God through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather through which God give sustenance to God's creatures."

Amen.

⁶ *Ibid*, 90.