

## What Makes Your Heart Sing

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August 10, 2025

Our scripture this morning asks us to contemplate some big questions: Where is your treasure? What is it to live awake, prepared for the presence of God? What makes your heart sing? What are the spiritual practices that help you to stay alert to how God is showing up in your life?

I had the amazing opportunity to have May, June and July to experiment and contemplate what is it that makes me feel alive and aligned with God. Belmont received a grant from the Lilly foundation for me to take these twelve weeks to immerse myself in practices and experiences that brought me renewal and joy. What if each day our prayers included, “Oh Lord, what renews my spirit, my heart, my mind, my body? What makes my heart sing? Oh God, let my treasure be with you. What patterns and habits do I have that keep me from being awake to the love of the Holy Spirit? What if God came as a boss, whom I’m ready to serve and instead this boss invites me to sit down and be served? What if God came as a thief to steal my false priorities? What are the systems and structures that benefit me, that I feel comfortable with, but cause harm and oppress others, If God came as Benevolent compassion am I prepared? If God came as a thief to steal away these unjust structures? Am I ready? Are my lamps lit?

These are energizing and prayerful things to consider, a good place to begin is taking time to notice, What makes your heart sing? How does this help you to be more in tune with God’s love and hopes for you? Our scripture says, “Do not be afraid, little flock, God delights in giving you the kingdom.” This is the good news of Jesus Christ. It is important to discern and to act on the things that draw us closer into the love of God, love of creation, love of neighbor and love of ourselves.

When I ask this of myself, I think about my family, being a part of this community of faith, being in nature, immersing myself in the lives of saints and mystics, solitude, learning new things, physical challenges, eating delicious food, When I remember what matters most, I am more aligned with God. I have the compass points to follow to grow spiritually, to be awake to the Holy.

Completing the Lilly grant for Renewal Leave took the cooperation and care of many! My family, Our Staff/Parish committee, members from the Finance team, a dream team to help me discern, church members and staff and many more! As we met and completed the different parts of the grant a clear focus emerged: “What will renew my spirit? Increase my connection with the Divine? The spiritual practices of Pilgrimage, Creativity and Adventure

My outward pilgrimage spiraled to so many beautiful places; Ireland with its expanse of green, of stone and wild water, Italy to walk in the footsteps of Saint Francis, my home in

Nashville to do the mundane and ordinary things, that are a lot more fun when they are not sandwiched between too many obligations and an over full calendar! I went to Montana for a yoga retreat, to the lake in Georgia to rest by the water with good books to read and plenty of sunscreen. It was a glorious adventure!! A pilgrimage of abundance! I have to pinch myself, how did I get to have the opportunity, privilege and honor to do this?? This was my outward journey and it gave image, voice and experience to my ongoing inward spiritual journey.

I love to read about the mystics and saints of Ireland—Saints Brigid, Kevin, Gobnait and Brendan and from Italy, Saints Francis and Clare. We have a legacy from each of them— stories that show us what is possible when our lives are ordered around loving God, loving creation and loving one another. What is possible when we live awake, ready for the Holy to enter our lives. Outrageous things happen! Lives are turned upside down; disrupted, transformed!

Even though I would like to share lots more about each of these saints and the places and ways I encountered them, today I will limit myself to the time I was in Italy to walk the Way of Saint Francis. His life shows us what happens when we do live from our heart's desire. When we trust in God's provision and ongoing presence. God's love disrupts our patterns and shakes up our priorities; God's love awakes us to live from the fullness of compassion and connection.

Francis was born into a wealthy merchant family in Assisi, Italy. He loved to have fun, to wear beautiful expensive clothes, have fancy things, throw lavish parties, to celebrate. As a young adult, he went to war and was held as a prisoner for over a year. In this time of desolation and solitude, he experienced the God in a way that opened his heart. When he was released, he could not ignore the poor, in their faces he saw the face of Christ he gave them his clothes. Everywhere he looked he saw God's loving presence, and the more awake he became, the more he gave from the fullness of his heart, the more he felt the presence of God.

However, all this stuff he was giving away, actually belonged to his family. His dad became so furious, he locked Francis in their basement and charged him with theft. There was a trial! The judge could only agree, Francis you did take your family's belongings, you have to repay them. Francis stood in front of the court, all he had were the clothes he was wearing, so he took them off to return to his father. Francis left the courthouse, began living in community and growing in faith. Francis may have prayed from these verses in Luke, "God, help me remember my treasure is with you. Help me to stay awake to how you are calling me to live and to be"

As he continued to be transformed by the love of God, he would walk from Assisi, through villages north towards Florence finding hospitality with friends, with strangers, with all of creation, and back through Assisi, south to Rome, sharing God's love with each person and creature. Because he walked up and down through this part of Italy a lot there are a lot of stories of the life he lived, in the varied landscapes he walked through; small caves where he would withdraw to pray, mighty trees that offered shelter from storms, stories of birds coming to hear him preach, of using kindness and love to convince a wolf to stop terrorizing a village,

monasteries, churches and homes where he passed through, his living an instrument of God's peace.

The more I learned about Francis and St Clare, the more I felt called to the places they lived and dwelled. I had the great good fortune of joining seven other pilgrims. five women, one man and a baby, our ages spreading from almost 2 to almost 70 and for reasons that are as individual as our fingerprint, we joined together to walk in the footsteps of Francis.

The land itself resonates with the sacredness of the community of saints, mystics and pilgrims who have also walked this way. Walking the Way of Saint Francis was humbling and enlightening. Each step a reminder of God's presence in the world, guiding towards deeper spiritual self-awareness, each step a reminder of my humanity, my strengths and my weaknesses and the myriad ways I am connected to my neighbor, to all of creation, to God and to my truest self.

Walking with Jane, Amanda, Kim, Keller, Hannah, Lane and Sylvan I became more appreciative of the simple joys in life, the amazing peace and beauty of nature, the wisdom from our different perspectives. Each night Keller suggested we share three words that expressed the essence of what we had experienced that day. One of the words that came to me again and again was Simplicity. The simplicity of 2 pairs of shorts and three shirts for thirty days, (and somehow having the heaviest suitcase!) the simplicity of our daily routine: Hike really far through God's amazing creation, rest, eat delicious food. The simplicity of rocks, grass and trees, the simplicity of the present moment. The poet Ingrid Goff-Maidoff writes, "God spoke in flowers today, and I, who was waiting on words almost missed the conversation."

Most days hiking was very hard! I was physically challenged and pushed to new limits. But meeting and rising to the challenge brought me more awareness of my inner strength, resilience, creativity, and sense of humor. The long days of hiking gave me a lot of time to think, reflect and to pray. To notice my thoughts, to wonder at my reactions. To be curious and listen to how God is speaking today: in the grove of olive trees, the deep forest, the steep hill, In the vast blue sky, the red poppies, in the silence and also in a hot cup of coffee, fresh pastries, in tuna and an apple for lunch, in pasta, pizza and afternoon aperitivos. Perhaps even as I locked myself out of our lodging, made a temporary hat out of leaves, in the joy of a washing machine, and the despair when a washing machine filled with our clothes refused to open! In all these things God speaks.

In the journals of poet, William Stafford, are these lines, "You can't tell when strange things with meaning will happen. I'm still here writing it down just the way it was. "You don't have to prove anything my mother said. "Just be ready for what God sends" I listened and put my hand out in the sun again. It was all easy." Reading this I felt such a glimmer of what Luke writes for us, "Be dressed for service and keep your lamps lit. Be ready for what God sends, Be like people waiting for their boss to come home from a celebration, ready to open the door for him...and the surprise when the boss dresses to serve you and seats you at the table as an honored guest.

When we pay attention to what makes our heart sing, we are getting dressed and ready for service, when we remember where our treasure lies, we are lit with joy and anticipation. The reverend Alyce McKensie reminds us, "God's holy thief is a burglar who returns to steal our false priorities and overturns our unjust structures". Luke says God is like a thief in the night and

the homeowner wants to keep this thief away, because this thief steals away what we do not need, steals away the structures that oppress, steals away power that harms and mistreats. God as holy thief disrupts and transforms. God as holy boss welcomes and cherishes

I will be forever grateful for the amazing gift from all of you, to have three months to grow in my readiness for what God sends.

On one of our hikes through deep woods, onto the ridge of a mountain, overlooking awe inspiring beauty, I heard a whisper, "Heather, be more Heather"

As each of us grows in love of God, one another and creation may we each be always becoming more of the unique one God has with love created us to be

Amen!