

A man was driving down the road with twenty penguins in his back seat. A motorcycle cop stopped him, and said, You can't drive around with penguins in your car. Take them to the zoo.

To which the man replied, Yes, officer.

The next day the same man was driving down the road with the same twenty penguins in the back seat. Again, the same officer stopped him. Hey! I thought I told you to take those guys to the zoo.

The man replied, I did. Today I'm taking them to the movies.

Ah, this marvelous, created world – black-tie penguins and humpback whales, the Great Barrier Reef and the Grand Canyon, Yosemite with its black bears and Half Dome granite, all magnificent, all glorious and all refracting intricately the faceted color of God –

I remember camping last year at Big Sur, above the Pacific, watching the nighttime sky – watching like it was television. The air was warm, so I lay outside in a t-shirt and shorts, without a fleece. The stars danced and twinkled and shot across the sky with a clarity I'd seen only twice in my life, on African mountains where the air is thin, and as a child.

St. Francis called the earth our “sister, Mother Earth,” and right then and there, watching the sky, I felt Mother Earth breathe; she inhaled and exhaled enormously, right next to me, the swell of tide being her pull of breath.

The earth is inconceivably beautiful, but nature itself also exhibits discord, and even violence.

In seminary, my spirituality professor, Michael Battle, showed us a National Geographic movie of lions hunting and killing other animals, chewing bones until the bones became shards. Indigenous violence, and Michael looked at us after showing the clip, and asked simply,

Is violence in our DNA? Are we destined to violence and degradation?

Perhaps this is destiny – and the color of God is woven as thread into the dark gray of evil? Are the two inseparable?

I have a bias in favor of dogs as pets. Yes, they are sloppy in their loyalty. Indiscriminate in who they befriend. Not like cats – who are very, very particular. Cats ignore me. But not dogs. Plus, dogs observe things.

A couple of weeks ago, I stubbed my little toe on a table leg. I grabbed my foot, hopped around on the other foot like a whirling dervish, and uttered things a priest should not utter.

I finally calmed down and that is when I noticed Olive. Over to the side, she had seen the whole thing, and was just watching me. You know the look – nose down, both eyes looking up. Ponderous.

Observing, but she couldn't say anything. She couldn't ask, "Are you okay," or, "it'll be okay." She couldn't even laugh at me. We know dogs can communicate, but they can't articulate. It must be frustrating, knowing more than you can say.

Perhaps our sister, Mother Earth, is just like dogs. She observes, but cannot articulate. Oh, the secrets she holds, and how she considers silently, day in and day out, both the kind and generous acts of some people, and conversely, the evil and perverse acts of others.

For there is on earth a duality: light and darkness, hope and despair, joy and sadness, good and evil.

It wasn't that St. Francis loved the animals more than most of us do, it was that he loved more than most of us do.

Francis grew-up in a rich family. His dad was a cloth merchant and wanted Francis to follow in his footsteps. Francis tried, but failed.

He failed because he was deeply empathetic – perhaps like Olive, here. He felt deeply the needs of those around him. One day, he sold his father's cloth stock so he could help a beggar. Another time, he sold it to help repair the dilapidated church so it could, in turn, help the poor.

Francis' father became angry at him, so he beat Francis – until finally Francis renounced his father. He left his family and this is when Francis moved to the streets. He made his home among destitute beggars, trusting only in God to provide food and clothing.

But oddly, in his complete abandonment, Francis discovered joy. In his poverty, he learned love. Francis loved people, not just animals, all those in desperate need.

So you see, it wasn't that Francis loved the animals more than most of us do, he just loved more than most of us do.

According to the Genesis story, it wasn't just humanity that fell with Adam and Eve, and sin and rebellion, all of earth fell.

The lion and the lamb, the shark and the seal, the spider and the fly. Which is why Paul says all of creation, longs for redemption like a woman in labor pains, as Paul writes, we all long for peace. The time when swords will be beat into ploughshares. When there will be no more war. When the lion and lamb will lie down together.

But we aren't there, yet, and colors of God are merely woven as thread into the gray. Olive cannot articulate the peace she seeks. Nor can rest of us, the Hindu, the Christian, the Jew and the Muslim. Even we humans cannot say we want peace without staking out our turf.

But we as people of faith believe at least this: that the light exists alongside the darkness, and the light will extinguish the darkness.

Little by little – today, tomorrow, and the next day – the little bit of light that you offer in this world makes a very real difference. And some day, literally and metaphorically, there will be peace, even in conflicted Jerusalem. The Palestinian and the Christian and the Jew and the Sunni and the American and Russian.

Some day, Republicans and Democrats will hold convention together.

Someday, the penguins will go to the movies in the same car with people!

No, we do not honor St. Francis because he loved animals more than we do; we honor him because he loved. And because we can, too.