

## FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Many people are familiar with Frederick Douglass' work as an abolitionist in the nineteenth century. What is not as well-known is the depth of Douglass' Christian faith. Douglass' love of scripture and his fascination with the apocalyptic writing of Revelation was a guidepost in his quest for personal holiness and social transformation.

Born to an enslaved woman and a white slave owner in 1818 on Maryland's Eastern Shore, Douglass was sent to work for a Baltimore shipbuilder following his mother's death when he was seven years old. Over the course of the next eight years, Douglass learned to read and write and developed a love of the Bible. His affinity for the Bible served as a catalyst for his conversion to the Christian faith when he was thirteen. In his well-known autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, he recalled that after being sent back to Maryland's Eastern Shore, he continued to have abiding hope in God's promises and established a Sunday school for other enslaved men and women.

While on the Eastern Shore, Douglass was subjected to numerous whippings and beatings from the plantation's overseer, which left permanent scars on his body. These violent beatings and Douglass' prophetic reading of scripture led him to plan his escape to freedom. Although his first attempt was not a success, in 1838 Douglass finally fled to safety in New York, before settling in New Bedford, Massachusetts with his wife. Together, they had five children.

In New Bedford, Douglass joined an abolitionist society and an A.M.E. Zion church, where he assumed leadership as the church's preacher. By 1841 Douglass was traveling across Canada and the northern United States rallying support against slavery. Douglass believed that individual holiness was essential to the reformation of society's morals and the work of abolitionists. To this end, Douglass

refused to drink alcohol, smoke tobacco, or engage in any other behavior he felt threatened the Christian's call to righteousness.

After the Civil War ended, Douglass continued advocating for equality—not only on behalf of African Americans, but Native Americans and women. For Douglass, God's justice would not be complete until all were treated with dignity. Douglass published more than ten books and speeches, including the conscience-raising, "What to a Slave is the Fourth of July?" He died at his Washington, D.C., home in 1895 and was buried in Rochester, New York. His Washington, D.C., home is currently a national landmark, housing Douglass' collection of Bibles, religious books, and angel depictions.

MARIA KANE

## COLLECT

*Almighty God, whose truth makes us free: We bless your Name for the witness of Frederick Douglass, whose impassioned and reasonable speech moved the hearts of a president and a people to a deeper obedience to Christ. Strengthen us also to be outspoken on behalf of those in captivity and tribulation, continuing in the Word of Jesus Christ our Liberator; who with you and the Holy Spirit dwells in glory everlasting. Amen.*

## FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Francis was born into a wealthy family in the early twelfth century. His younger years were spent like many rich young men of the day—partying rather than praying. A series of events, including an imprisonment and a serious illness, began to shift Francis' priorities and awareness. On a pilgrimage to Rome, Francis was moved to compassion by encounters with beggars outside St. Peter's Cathedral.

When Francis returned home, he broke from his old life, taking up the disciplines of poverty and devotion. While attending Mass one day, Francis heard the words of Jesus from Matthew's Gospel, asking his disciples to leave all and follow him. These words guided Francis' life from henceforth. He became an itinerant preacher embracing poverty, humility, and devotion to the Holy Eucharist. He soon had people joining him in his example of ministry. When the number of followers reached twelve, Francis wrote a rule for the group and soon obtained papal approval for the "friars minor" as they called themselves. They continued to grow and encouraged a similar society for women (founded by Clare of Assisi) as well as a Third Order for lay associates.

Francis was not a priest and evidence that he might have been a deacon comes mainly from the account by Bonaventure, who wrote of Francis's use of a cave in the Italian village of Greccio to preach about the Nativity. Francis used a manger and two live animals (an ox and an ass) to teach about the Babe of Bethlehem. Thus, we have the first recorded account of a crèche. The hay Francis used in the crèche was reported to have cured local cattle of disease.

There are many legends surrounding Francis' interactions with animals. From preaching to birds to freeing fish and rabbits caught for meals, Francis was often reported to call these creatures "Brother" and "Sister." The source of the stories is unclear, but

Francis expressed his love of creation and an understanding that we are in relationship not just with each other as humans but with all of creation in his "Canticle of Brother Sun." While Francis composed several other prayers, he most likely was not the author of the prayer most commonly attributed to him—"Lord, make me an instrument of your peace"—since its composition date is 1912, several centuries after Saint Francis died.

In prayerful preparation for Michaelmas 1224, Francis received the stigmata, the five wounds of Christ. He received care for these wounds in several cities, but in 1226 he requested to be taken back to Portiuncula, the site of the church where he first heard the words from Matthew bidding him to give up all he had and live the gospel. He died where his call was birthed on October 3, 1226, and he was canonized less than two years later.

He devoted himself to a life of preaching the gospel by caring for the poor as one of them, by honoring God in all creation, by his profound devotion to prayer and humility, and by his forming community to join him in God's ministry.

LAURIE BROCK

## COLLECT

*Most high, omnipotent good Lord, grant your people grace to renounce gladly the vanities of this world: that following the way of blessed Francis, we may for love of you delight in your whole creation with perfectness of joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*