

Saved by Beauty

Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 4-9; Matthew 4:12-23

Third Sunday after Epiphany, (Jan. 26), 2020

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Our reading from Psalm 27 this morning says, “One thing have I asked: to behold the beauty of the Lord” (v. 4). This verse and this Psalm are part of a series of “Ascent” Psalms, meaning psalms that were sung and chanted as people made their way up to Jerusalem and up to the Temple. This was no small thing. Jews who lived north near Dan or down south near Beersheba and all in between, had a challenging and difficult journey to go up (always “up”) to Jerusalem and the Temple. For most people this was a once in a lifetime pilgrimage – an act of devotion and worship in which the journey as well as the destination itself was part of the devotion. For the most part, these farmers did not live on hospitable land or travel by way of nice roads. The country was rugged, mostly arid and dry, covered in gray rocks and brown rough hills, and the only color they saw was a little green during the spring in the barley they grew as a crop and their garden plots. They had very little, knew how to live on very little, prayed every day for rain, and scrimped and saved so some day they would be able to join together in caravan and go up to Jerusalem so they might worship in the glorious house of the Lord, the Temple.

The Temple itself was stunning in its majesty and beauty. Including its porches and outlying areas, the Temple covered well over several city blocks. Three stories high, which doesn’t seem much to us, but to people who had never seen anything bigger than small houses and large sheds, it was breathtaking. The pilgrims would enter Jerusalem, itself a wonder. People were everywhere

thronging to worship singing and chanting the psalms, sheep bleating, vendors hawking their wares, then the pilgrims would enter the Temple grounds through the outer walls and their breath would catch as they gazed up at the massive building covered in white marble gleaming in the sunlight, brightly colored tapestries flapping in the breeze, and the sun hitting the gold inlaid walls and furnishings. The Temple was designed to be paradise on earth, so it was no wonder that the people would cry out, “My soul longs, ye fainst for the courts of the Lord,” and, “How lovely is thy dwelling place.” Thousands of pilgrims murmuring, gasping in awe and chanting the psalms, mixed in with the bleating of thousands of sheep, then the blare of the shofar (the rams horn call to prayer), worshippers jammed into the temple, the sun streaming through high clerestory windows, the brilliance of the light on the gold-spattered walls nearly blinding them, they cried, “One thing I have asked: to behold the beauty of the Lord.”

Have you ever beheld the beauty of the Lord? Maybe it was something like I just described about entering the ancient Temple in Jerusalem or perhaps worship in another place. I remember the first time I saw Salisbury Cathedral in England: You can see the spire from around the city, but only until passing through one of the gates into the cathedral commons and across the great green expanse of lawn that surrounded that extraordinary Gothic cathedral did I see the beauty of the Lord. I remember walking across the green commons looking for the statue of poet George Herbert, among many other statues along the exterior of the building, and as I drew close to the building, I began to hear choirs singing beautiful anthems. Unbeknownst to us, there was a cathedral choir festival going on that same week we were there and their music echoing through the cathedral drifted out across the commons. I remember leaning against the building under George Herbert and weeping, overcome with the beauty of the Lord.

Or maybe you beheld the beauty of the Lord like I did in a small wooden, country church in Central Texas where I was the young pastor. It was at the funeral of a beloved old farmer, Brother Barnett, who lived across the road from the church. The building was packed and we sang old hymns with tears of grief and joy running down our faces. I preached an inadequate sermon about a more than adequate man and an extraordinary savior whom he had served for over eighty years. Then six tough, old, rough-hewn men carried the casket out the door of the church while the congregation followed, across the lawn and dirt road to the cemetery and laid Brother Barnett to rest in a grave next to his parents who had been born not long after the Civil War and were buried in that place during World War II. Afterwards, I watched Laddie May, a lineman for the electric company, and Carl Favors, who ran a back-hole business, stand under a cedar tree and shake each other's gnarly hands and then wrap their arms around each other and cry and cry. The beauty of the Lord was there that day and I saw it in the beauty of a life well lived and a death among friends who loved each other.

Or perhaps it was like when I beheld beauty when I met Jane. Across a large church sanctuary I spotted her blue eyes, wild curls, and a smile that lit up the entire church. Two years later it was up close standing not twenty feet from where we first met as we said "I do" and "I will" to each other, to God, and to 300 witnesses.

Rev. Dr. James Howell, Duke-educated highly sophisticated pastor of Myers Park United Methodist Church in Charlotte, NC tells of the time he was invited to preach at a big Pentecostal meeting. He thought it was a mistake, figuring they meant to call someone else. But they persisted and said they knew who they were

inviting. When he arrived his host said, “We’ll sing one song before you talk.” And then the song went on for what must have been thirty minutes. At first it was normal singing and music, then the room came to life, the people rose, swayed, hands raised, this going on for fifteen or twenty minutes. About that time, he said, “My host lapsed into something that wasn’t in the song, something nobody else was doing. Hands raised, head lifted, he kept repeating, over and over, ‘Jesus, you are so beautiful. Jesus, you are so beautiful. Jesus, you are so beautiful.’”

The Pentecostal tradition is very different from me, just like it was for James Howell, but that fellow was on to something: he knew how to behold the beauty of the Lord. You or I might do it differently, but beholding the beauty of the Lord is something we likely need to learn. How?

The Eastern Orthodox tradition has a line that says that in beauty we catch “traces of divine fragrance and droplets of divine love.” In other words, when we behold something beautiful – a mountain in the distance, a desert sunset, a painting, literature, great music – human made beauty or natural beauty, it all shows us something of the beauty of God – *something* of the beauty of God – traces of divine fragrance and droplets of divine love. As the Apostle Paul says, “We know only in part” (I Cor. 13:9). But the part of beauty that we see or hear or experience helps us behold the beauty of the Lord.

One of the ways Christian theology and philosophy has talked about beauty is that it is a kind of wholeness. Wholeness, in this sense, means that someone or something participates in or approaches its true purpose, its end, why it was created. When we see something that reminds us of what God has truly intended, we call it beautiful. And this is true of nature, or a piece of literature, or a dance, or

music, or one of the visual arts, or a person, and so on. I'm not talking about something being pretty; the beautiful helps us enter the truth while what's pretty simply dazzles the eye. The beautiful helps us know something of the truth. And here's the thing: it's something of truth that cannot be known any other way.

We can try to explain or analyze beauty but even our best efforts fall short. We can learn better how to look for or listen for beauty or appreciate beauty. But in the end, our analysis falls short and all we can do is participate in it, abide in it, behold it. And every time we behold, even a glimpse of beauty, we respond, "Thank you God. I'm reminded of why I was created." Or, "Thank you God, this music shows me something of what you want this world to be." Or, "O Lord, our God, these trees show me what your Earth should be and can be."

This time of the year I like to have a small fire in my fire bowl on my porch or have a fire in the fireplace. I'm an Eagle Scout; I know how to build a fire – how to properly stack the wood in such a way that helps a fire catch and grow. I know how to light a fire and even how to gather good wood for a fire. But in the end, there is more to the fire than the wood, the lighter, how it is stacked, and so on. There is light and heat – but there is *more*. There is *more* to a fire than its constituent parts.

Beauty is like that. Whatever we say about it, there is *more*. The beautiful approaches wholeness; it is not yet complete. Something in it and in us yearns for more. And we find ourselves hungering and thirsting for that more.

The beautiful helps us see something of the truth and wholeness of what God intends. And sometimes the beautiful shows us what's missing, or the truth of how

we fail to approach wholeness. Sometimes see beauty and we realize how much we have settled for ugliness in life – our ugly way of seeing, our ugly way of speaking, our ugly way of treating others and ugly way of treating God’s creation.

New Testament scholar N. T. Wright says that this is why the church has seen art as so important for centuries. “The arts are not the pretty but irrelevant bits around the border of reality. They are highways into the center of a reality which cannot be glimpsed let alone grasped any other way” (*Simply Christian*, p. 235).

E. B. White, once said in a *New York Times* interview in 1969, “I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve (or save) the world and a desire to enjoy (or savor) the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.”

To behold the beauty means savoring and enjoying and taking time to enter into Reality, to move closer to God. We are a congregation deeply committed (using E.B. White’s words) on saving the world. But what if we are missing something immensely important by not savoring and beholding beauty?

In Dostoevsky’s novel, *The Idiot*, Prince Myskin says, “Beauty will save the world.” Beauty. Not money, not might, not power, not gritting our teeth and trying harder. Beauty.

I wonder what it might mean that the world will be saved by beauty. We remember, as I said a moment ago, that beauty points to the wholeness and completeness of creation. So partly beauty shows us what we could be, what this world should be. At the same time, one of the ways the church has understood “salvation” is “wholeness.” Salvation is God putting us and this world back

together where everything and everyone fits together in the beautiful way God intended.

In other words, perhaps our gap between saving the world and savoring the world is not as big as we thought. They're connected, facets of the single work of God in repairing and healing the world and making it whole.

When we participate in saving the world – building a Habitat house, growing a garden, sewing a quilt, serving an immigrant, singing a song, let's remember that we want to do so beautifully. There is so much ugliness in us and around us these days. Sometimes we are so intent on telling the truth that we do so with ugliness. Instead, let us speak beautifully. Let us show beauty in how we conduct our lives and how we treat others.

Early in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s career, he preached a sermon called, "How the Christian Overcomes Evil." As he liked to do, he told an illustration from mythology. In *The Odyssey* (Bk. 12) Homer tells the story of Odysseus and his ship trying to get past the dreaded island of the Sirens. The challenge was that the Sirens sang hauntingly seductive songs, luring sailors to the rocks and shipwreck. Odysseus managed to get his sailors past by stuffing wax into the rowers' ears and then strapping himself to the mast of the ship. But Martin Luther King reminded his hearers there was another story from mythology about the Sirens. Orpheus too, had to sail past the same islands and hear the same seductive music that would lead them to death. Instead Orpheus pulled out his lyre, and played a more beautiful song than the songs of the Sirens, so his rowers listened to him instead of to them (see Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63*, p. 99f).

We might try to shut out the world, or strap ourselves to the authority of the Bible or the history of the Church or what we grew up with. And we might try to grit our teeth and bear down to get through. But maybe being more beautiful is what will get us through? Perhaps the way we are to deal with the ugliness of evil is by being more beautiful?

The Apostle Paul says, “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is beautiful - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about these things” (Philippians 4:8).

Let us think about, savor, enjoy, and behold the beauty of the Lord. And then let us go out there and reflect that beauty.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.