

Surrounded in Beauty

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When I saw today's lectionary readings, and knew we would be thinking about them together in this splendid place, I got excited: the disciples (who weren't really disciples just yet) traipsing off for seemingly no good reason after this Jesus they'd just met, Paul boasting of the death of this same Jesus by calling his gruesome crucifixion "foolishness," and then the Psalm's lovely reflection: "One thing have I asked: to behold the beauty of the Lord" - this being the climax to the arduous journey pilgrims took across rugged countryside in ancient Israel, people who had nothing, who prayed daily for rain, who barely eked out a living from rocky soil, traveling in caravans, singing "My soul longs, ye fainst for the courts of the Lord," finally arriving in Jerusalem, and at first glimpse of the gleaming pavements of the cubish temple, designed as a paradise on earth, they (who never saw anything substantial) cried out, "How lovely is thy dwelling place"; hearing the murmur of other caravans, the bleating of thousands of sheep, the blare of the shofar, worshippers jammed into the temple, and as the sun streamed through high clerestory windows, the brilliance of the light on the gold-spattered walls and furnishings nearly blinding them, they exclaimed, "One thing I have asked: to behold the beauty of the Lord."

When I was in school here, we worried that we would walk beneath the tower of this chapel so often that we might take its grandeur, its splendor for granted. No matter where we are, we get befuddled and forget that the Church has this beauty, in a Chapel as stunning at Duke's, or in the little wooden A-frame my grandfather and his friends built with their own hands during the same time this Chapel was being built after strong winds had huffed and puffed and blown the old Church down - his work a thing of beauty just as much as Duke Chapel, perhaps in the way a child's coloring and a Rembrandt are both very much "art."

We are surrounded in beauty, but our minds wander, and when we weren't looking we developed this unwitting expertise at ugliness. In my preaching I have railed against injustice, against racism, against the war, against a decadent, self-indulgent culture - but in retrospect I now see I have done so in ugly ways. I have spoken of peace with a verbal violence; I have attacked prejudice but with an intellectual prejudice. Like Ulysses fearing the sirens, I have crammed wax in the rower's ears and strapped myself to some mast, instead of doing as Orpheus did, playing music on the lyre more beautiful

than the song of the sirens.¹ The singer Jewel (before she “went bad” and became a pop diva) wrote these lyrics:

Please be careful with me,
I’m sensitive, and I’d like to stay that way.
I have this theory that if we're told we're bad
Then that's the only idea we'll ever have.
But maybe if we are surrounded in beauty
Someday we will become what we see
Please be careful with me,
I’m sensitive, and I’d like to stay that way.

What is Beauty?

We witness so much ugliness: the aftermath of the tsunami, Baghdad, and perhaps more insidiously the lies, fakes, baubles that pretend and usurp the place of beauty, the pretty, the cute, the glitzy. I’ve tried to read a good bit in aesthetic theory, philosophers speaking of symmetry, or the sublime, a block universe. Most of them wind up quoting Rilke:

Beauty is the beginning of terror,
which we can just barely endure,
and we stand in awe of it
as it coolly disdains to destroy us.²

But for my money I’ll take what Harvard’s Elaine Scarry wrote:

You are about to be in the presence of something life-giving, life-saving. It is not clear whether you should throw yourself on your knees before it, or keep your distance, but you had better figure out the right answer because this is not an occasion for carelessness or leaving your posture to chance. It is not that beauty is life-threatening, but instead that it is life-affirming.³

Before beauty I am vulnerable. Beauty reaches inside me, and yanks something out of me. I’ve been polling people, asking “What are the two or three most beautiful moments in your life?” At first blush, they say something like Monet’s garden at Giverny, or a rock formation in Arizona, or hearing a string quartet play Barber’s *Adagio*.

But if I press them, they gravitate toward some moment when words that matter were exchanged. Twenty years ago I stood before Lisa and said “I love you.” When you dare something so perilous, you take this fragile crystal of your self, and you hand it over to the other person, who can do with you as

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., used this illustration in his sermon, “How the Christian Overcomes Evil,” narrated well in Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), p. 99f.

² Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, tr. Edward Snow (New York: North Point, 2000), p. 5.

³ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1999), p. 27.

she will. She could have dropped and shattered me into a thousand pieces, never to be retrieved – but luckily she held me close to herself and said, “I love you too.”

A man answered my inquiry just the other day by telling how his aged father came to him, explained why things had been the way they had been, apologized, and added, “I am so immensely proud of you.”

Not all beautiful moments seem so happy. My grandfather’s death: the phone rang in the middle of the night, my parents piled my sister and me into the car, and we drove through the dark toward dawn. We pulled up in front of the house, my father got out, and my sister and I watched him walk up to his two brothers under the old oak tree, and we saw these military veterans, strong men who worked with their hands, fall on each others’ shoulders, and they cried out loud. The beauty? I learned then that life is fragile, that love is deep.

Beautiful Savior

The Church is like a big ark of the covenant that bears beautiful words that matter. The Church is like some manger, and swaddled inside is Jesus, “Fairest Lord Jesus, beautiful savior.” The strangest, most unlikely speaking invitation I’ve ever received came four or five years ago. A voice on the other end of the phone asked me to be the keynote speaker at a national conference of Foursquare Gospel-Pentecostal clergy. I replied, “You must have the wrong number. I’m James Howell, the Methodist.” But he insisted – so I went. My host greeted me, and said “We’ll sing one song before you talk.” The song went on for what must have been thirty minutes. It started as our songs start, but then the room came to life, the people rose, swayed, hands raised, making even the Cameron Crazies seem a bit sedate. Fixed in my place on the stage where I was sure everyone was wondering what was wrong with me (I mean, I have mastered this kind of “Protestant stiffness”), I thought I was disqualifying myself to speak by not entering into the swaying. So I swayed, lifted my arms – and then almost as uneasily put them right back down and stopped swaying, concluding I looked thirty percent less foolish just standing there. About that time, 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.” I wondered. What is that? And I think I want whatever that is. You see, you and I tend to go at Jesus with something like “Hey Jesus, I’ve got this deal and I want you to get on board with it.” But he’s totally forgotten the time. Jesus, you are so beautiful.

Fairest Lord Jesus, Beautiful Savior. Jesus did not come down as a mighty warrior, unleashing a divine juggernaut to crush his foes. No, Jesus came as an infant, just a little baby. When Sarah, my oldest, was born, I took her to the Church where blue collar laborers, men with gruff voices, melted at the sight of her, their voices peeping with sweet peeping sounds, their massive hands become gentle pillows holding her. Jesus, nursing at Mary's breast. How beautiful. Didn't God know the tenderness, the appeal – even to those who may not buy into the Christian story? Isn't this why Eliot's *Silas Marner* continues to appeal? The weaver of Raveloe, his gold stolen, desolate, looked on his candlelit floor one night and saw – the gold! He put down the candle, reached his hand to scoop up the gold, but “instead of hard coin” he found “soft curls.” It was a little girl.

He had a dreamy feeling that this child was somehow a message come to him from a far-off life; it stirred old quiverings of tenderness, old impressions of some power presiding over his life. Marner took the little girl on his lap, trembling with an emotion mysterious to himself... He could only have said that the child was come instead of the gold - that the gold had turned into this child. He named her Eppie. She loved sunshine, sounds, and every other thing in God's world. The gold had asked that he should sit weaving longer and longer, deafened to all things except the monotony of his loom; but Eppie called him away from his weaving, and made him think all its pauses a holiday, warming him into joy because she had joy.⁴

Why did those fishermen follow? Was there something compelling, something beautiful about him? This Jesus was gentle with those who had been roughed up by life: lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors. How beautiful. His teaching: we will hear next week how Jesus did not say “Blessed are the rich, blessed are the cool, blessed are the good-looking, blessed are those with advanced degrees from Duke,” but instead, “Blessed are the poor, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the peacemakers.” How beautiful.

Aesthetic Division

But some didn't think so. They arrested this beautiful Savior and executed him, nailing him to an olive shaft. Paul spoke of this as the “foolishness of God.” Richard Hays wrote that this cross creates “a sharp epistemological division”⁵ in how we think and what we value. Perhaps the cross creates a

⁴ George Eliot, *Silas Marner* (New York: Bantam, 1981), p. 119, 124.

⁵ Richard Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville: John Knox, 1997), p. 28.

sharp aesthetic division, a startling new vision of beauty. St. Augustine, contemplating the crucifixion, wrote that “His deformity is our beauty.”⁶

The very beauty of God, hidden and revealed simultaneously in the cross, is perhaps voiced in a Saxon poem from early in the Middle Ages. “The Dream of the Rood” in its 155 lines imagines the cross telling its story. “I was a sapling at the edge of a wood. Soldiers came and cut me down, stripping my branches, staking me in the ground to serve as an instrument of execution. But there came to me no criminal, but the young Hero. They nailed him to me; his sweat and blood soaked into me. I trembled, but dared not bend. After he died, they took him down and threw me into a pit. But years later they dug me up, and adorned me with jewels and decked me with gold, and now I rise high above the earth, with the power to heal all who bow before me.”⁷

Why does this beauty matter? Because despite our wariness we all want to give the fragile crystal of ourselves away to what is truly Beautiful. Because men still fall on each others’ shoulders and cry out loud. Because the world’s faked lies have been exposed. Because we look at our hands and we no longer want to say “I’ll do with these as I wish!” but we want to say “Beautiful Savior, my hands are really yours. Do with them as you will. I want to be good, I want to be shaped by your Beauty.” Listen to this marvelous thought from Stanley Hauerwas:

We must be attracted by a beauty so compelling we discover lives not our own. Such a discovery comes through suffering and takes time, because we do not give up our illusions easily. Liturgy is quite literally where we learn to suffer God’s beauty and so suffering discover we are made in God’s image. Through worship we discover the truth about ourselves, making possible lives of goodness otherwise impossible. The beauty, the goodness, and the truth of our liturgy is tested by our being sent forth. If we are not jarred by the world to which we return, then something has gone wrong. The beauty we have beheld in the gift of God’s Son leaves its mark. Formed by such beauty we no longer desire to live by the lies that would have us call lies true, evil good, and ugliness beautiful.⁸

We have seen the Beautiful Savior, in the beauty of this place, and we won’t even notice the door slamming behind us as we drop our nets and traipse off

⁶ Quoted by Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics* (London: SCM, 2002), p. 142.

⁷ This is my summary of a complex, 155 line poem I learned of reading W.H. Vanstone, *Fare Well in Christ* (London: Darton Longman Todd, 1997), p. 42.

⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), p. 164.

after him, mostly listening for any word from him, our only words to him being either “Jesus, you are so beautiful,” or that song...

Please be careful with me.

I’m sensitive, and I’d like to stay that way.

Maybe if we are surrounded in beauty,

Someday we will become what we see.

So please be careful with me.

I’m sensitive, and I’d like to stay that way.