

Isaiah in today's reading declares the good news: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness-- on them light has shined." I can understand the experience.

My junior year of college was one of the darkest times in my life. By darkest, I don't mean that I was depressed, but quite literally that it was dark all the time. You see, that year I studied abroad in Belfast, North Ireland. The hardest thing about that year wasn't being so far from friends and family, or going somewhere that I had never been, where I knew no one. No, the hardest thing was adjusting to the climate, particularly the winter. It wasn't particularly cold or snowy, but it was dark, very dark. Because Ireland is so far north, halfway into Canada by longitude, the sun in winter would rise at ten and set at 3 and all day the sky would be overcast. Coming from Florida which has lots of sun, I couldn't handle that. I was never diagnosed, but I know that I was suffering from what is known as "seasonal affective disorder." What I wanted, what I needed was to see the sun. And I remember distinctly one winter morning when I was on holiday in Galway on the other side of the island. I walked outside to look at the ocean and the sun was just coming up over the horizon. It was the first time in months that I saw a blue sky. The rising sun quickly bathed me and the whole coast in light. I just stood there taking it in, basking in the warmth and soaking in the beauty of scene. I saw many beautiful things that year, as I traveled throughout Europe— gothic cathedrals, the Scottish highlands, the crown jewels of England, the immensity of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, art by Monet and Michelangelo, and countless cultural treasures. But nothing was as beautiful to me as the dawn of that winter morning in Galway.

The author of the psalm appointed for today also speaks of beauty. Only the beauty he speaks of is not the beauty of nature or of art. Rather, the beauty he speaks of is God's beauty. In verse 5, the psalmist confesses the desire of his heart: "one thing have I asked of the LORD; one thing I seek, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, *to behold the beauty of the Lord*, and seek God in the temple." The psalmist, likely a pilgrim on the way to a festival in Jerusalem, is speaking of the beauty of being in God's presence in the Temple in Jerusalem. It's hard for us to imagine the scene—the sun reflecting off the temple's white stone walls and gold decorations, the smells of sacrificial roast meat mixing with the incense, the solemn processions, the joyous festivals, the singing mixing with praises to God. Such an experience, the Jews felt, was a foretaste of heaven.

I experienced something like this when I was in seminary. First year seminarians had no obligations to serve anywhere, so we would sometimes go to churches of other Christian traditions, to experience a different style of worship. One Sunday a friend of mine and I decided to go to the nearby Greek Orthodox church. My friend and I had never been to an Orthodox church and were surprised to find they did not speak any English in the service. Since we couldn't follow the prayers, we just sat back and took it all in. And it was quite a lot to take in. In contrast to the plainness of most Protestant churches, Orthodox worship involves all the senses— sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing. As we sat in the pews we were enveloped in a cloud of the

most beautiful smelling incense, strangely captivated by the brightly painted icons all over the walls, and enthralled by the foreign sounds and rhythms of Orthodox chant. It was an amazing experience. The only word I can use to describe it is “beautiful.”

Sadly, beautiful is not a word that many of us often use to describe worship. Biblically accurate, maybe, comforting perhaps, even inspiring at times, but not beautiful. Why is that? I reckon it has something to do with our Protestant heritage. You see, the Reformers and particularly those who came immediately after them distrusted beauty and disdained art in churches, deeming it popery and idolatry. And in fact some of it was distracting, distracting from God. So mobs of iconoclasts went around smashing statues, breaking stained glass and destroying religious art in a zealous rampage. We Protestants may not be so destructive today, but most of us are still more comfortable with plain worship spaces, learned sermons, and the barest of ritual, than we are with effusive, creative, and colorful liturgy. Beauty is not something we associate with church—or with God. I was talking about this passage some years ago with some colleagues of mine, two retired Lutheran pastors, and they confessed that the phrase “the beauty of the Lord” did nothing for them. They didn’t have any experience that connected the beautiful and the divine.

Now, I wouldn’t want to judge anyone’s relationship with God, but it surely seems to me that by ignoring “the beauty of the Lord,” we are missing out on knowing God more deeply and we are missing an opportunity to share the gospel. For, ours is a culture that is hungry for beauty, *obsessed* with it. Stand in line at the checkout counter at Publix, watch any commercial on TV, look at the advertisement insert in the paper, and you will quickly see how important beauty is to us. Americans spend millions of dollars on beauty products each year, and millions more on fitness and weight loss and cosmetic surgery. Who knows how much is spent on the fashion industry, the music industry, the advertising industry—large parts of our society and our economy that are focused on beauty—selling it, promising it, or creating it. To be sure, Christians are right to be wary of this attention given to beauty. Much of what we consider beautiful is only skin-deep, fleeting, and false. There are in the scriptures plenty of warnings against the allure of superficial beauty.

Yet, even the beauty offered by *Cosmo* and *Glamour* can in its own small way point to the beauty of God. Men, have you ever walked down the street and all of a sudden you see a beautiful woman, I mean a *really* beautiful woman, *strikingly* beautiful? You cannot help but notice her. There is something that demands that you notice her. I don’t mean to give excuse for men gawking at women—we need to have custody over our eyes. But that desire to look at beauty is part of who we are—not just as men, but as human beings. For the same can be said, I assume, of women when they see an attractive man, or of any of us when we hear a beautiful song or read an elegant poem, or see a radiant sunset. Beauty has a way of reaching out to us, seizing us, demanding our attention, our adoration. And this suggests something about God. The New Testament scholar, Tom Wright says, "Our ordinary experiences of beauty are given to us to provide a clue to give us a starting point, a signpost, from which we move on to recognize, to glimpse, to be overwhelmed by, to adore, and so to worship, not just the majesty, but the beauty of God himself."

This is the nature of beauty—it attracts us, it captivates, it enralls us. Most of us don’t think a lot about beauty, about what it is, despite our being clearly obsessed by it. The ancient

philosophers thought a lot about it though. To them, beauty was one of the three “transcendentals.” According to classic philosophy, there are three things that humans live for, three “transcendent” ideas that we never tire of as human beings: truth, goodness, and beauty. Truth speaks to the mind, imparting knowledge. Goodness speaks to the will, encouraging action. And beauty...beauty speaks to the heart, to the emotions, and it draws us to the source of beauty. What’s more, these three—truth, goodness and beauty—are related to one another. There’s a unity to them. For this reason, philosophers speak of the truth of beauty, the goodness of truth, and the beauty of goodness. With the coming of Christianity, these three transcendentals became ascribed to God—God is truth, goodness and beauty. Now we have no problem ascribing the first two to God—God is true and good—but God is beautiful, too.

This is important because it is God’s beauty that attracts us, captivates us, draws us in, not unlike being caught like a fish in a net. Here we see how fitting it is that the gospel lesson assigned for today is the story of Jesus’ calling four fishermen to be his disciples, to become “fishers of men.” What is striking about this story is that so far as we know, this was the first encounter that Peter, Andrew, James and John had with Jesus. Yet, when Jesus called them, they dropped their nets and followed him. Why would these ordinary fishermen give up their jobs, their families, everything they’d known to follow a wandering preacher? The answer can only be in Jesus himself. There must be something attractive about Jesus, something charismatic, something *beautiful* about him. Indeed, the very name of our church reflects this. When in John’s Gospel, Jesus calls himself the “Good Shepherd,” the adjective he uses, *kalos*, means not simply good, but beautiful, even lovely. Church of the Beautiful Shepherd. And it wasn’t that he was particularly handsome. Isaiah prophesied about the Messiah, saying, “he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.” What was desirable, what was attractive, what was *beautiful*, was his heart, his character, his way of relating to people.

And just as these four fishermen were attracted to Jesus, Jesus called them to attract others to him. “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” These fishermen were charged with sharing the gospel, with expressing the goodness, truthfulness, *and beauty* of Jesus. As fishermen, they knew how to use nets to draw fish to them, now they were to use the beauty of the Good News to draw others to Jesus. And the crazy thing is, in the process they too would become beautiful. As Isaiah says, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim salvation.”

Like those first disciples, Jesus’ disciples today are called to continue that mission, to attract others to Jesus. We are to fish for people, to catch them with the beauty of the Lord. We are to attract others not just with the truth of Christian teachings or the goodness of Christian morality, but to enthrall them with beauty, with the beauty of the Lord, with the beauty of holiness.

Christians have long understood the importance of beauty, and throughout Christendom, faithful believers employed their highest artistic and architectural skills in the construction of their churches—Sainte-Chapelle, Westminster Abbey, La Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, the Duomo in Milan and San Marcos in Venice, the Byzantine Hagia Sophia, onion-domed St. Basil’s in Moscow. These are beautiful, gorgeous churches, inspiring and breathtaking. And the thing is, their beauty was a choice. Beauty, art is extravagant by nature; it’s not practical. God hears our

prayers just as well when we can pray in hut as if we prayed in a cathedral. And yet their builders, their worshippers devoted their best, their greatest artistic talents to what they cared about most, their churches, making their worship spaces resplendent for God who is the source of that beauty.

But, as attractive as these churches are, you don't have to have ornately embroidered altar frontals and carved rood screens, the air full of sweet incense and polyphonic hymns sung by a hundred-person choir in order to have beautiful worship. Those things can help, but they are not what *makes* worship beautiful. Our worship is beautiful when what we do and what we say reflects, expresses and cultivates the truth, goodness, and yes, the beauty of God.

Fact is, people are hungry—starving!—for this beauty. We live in an ugly world, a world of poverty, of violence, hunger, pollution, jealousies, lies and pettiness. All the attention we give to pretty faces, to art, to adorning ourselves is an attempt to appease this hunger. The world needs to see another way to live, a *more beautiful* way to live. Jesus comes to us this season of Epiphany as beauty amidst our ugliness, as a sun dawning on a dark winter's morning, showing us how to live beautifully. He calls us, summons us, to experience that beauty, to be immersed in it, and to become a beautiful people, a people who radiate with the beauty of the Lord. By this we show the world God's beauty. As Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the great, Russian novelist, once wrote, "Beauty will save the world." Beauty, the beauty of the Lord, will save the world. Thanks be to God! Amen.

And it's not just Old-World church architecture. I occasionally receive these flyers, glossy brochures from this church restoration company. The pages of their ads are covered with images of the most beautiful, colorful, intricately decorated churches, churches I'd love to see, to worship in, to simply be there and take it. These churches just evoke the grandeur and glory and beauty of God.