

Sermon 9-15-19  
Paul Purdue preaching

Eight children and eight adults sat along Mount Leconte's cliff-tops watching the sun receding over the Smokies. It was so spectacularly beautiful. The sun hung full, pale, orange, and low over the Smoky Mountains until meeting the horizon when it squished together and disappeared. A thousand fading streams of lilac and gold slowly turned to grey. Was the scene more splendid than any inside the Louvre or Met? Absent Mother Sun, the trees, verdant green, grew a spooky grey. A wispy silver fog advanced along an unseen creek-bed with ghost-like clouds growing up the cooling mountainsides. The night chill sent many towards warmer cabins. As if leaving before church really ended, they departed with loving whispers and gentle kisses.

My 79 year-old mother took a spare blanket from her niece and slid it over her head. Mom hiked the 11 mile Boulevard Trail to be with family. She exaggerated a shiver. My oldest joined her under the blanket. His curly blond hair danced in the breeze. I watched them watching the silvery fog advance. The wind whistled. Bird songs ceased. Mom's fingers were long and thin, punctuated by huge arthritic knuckles which refused to release any of her rings. Ten year old Lewis cradled her age spotted hands. Both shared the same blue eyes that drank in the richness of our sanctuary. An occasional intergenerational giggle added holy mystery. Did they share some secret, "don't tell your dad, but..." or was mom again tracing each letter of "I love you" into his open palm? Too soon, Lewis would be driving and picking up Mom from adult daycare: fixing her a snack and doing calculus as Granny Due napped in our sunroom.

Which scene is more beautiful? What delights our Creator more: the beauty of human love or the majesty of the mountains? Why do we even ask? Why do we rate the top ten attractions on Tripadvisor? What leads us to make lists of top restaurants, colleges or even careers? What compels us to out-do each other with posts on social media? Why do we rehearse the unexamined market god's mantra: "consume, crave, compete, repeat"? Why do we strive against each other like Cain against Abel and Rachel against Leah?

Could we stop and spot the Divine Image around us? Perhaps, the first chapter in faith's Field Guide: "Stop: spot beauty!" As the service ends, we will pass out simple frames so we might slow down and look for "anything excellent or worthy of praise"! What would happen if we reframed our lives by looking for beauty?

The Bible begins with an image of God: "when the Creator began creating." When did the Creator stop creating? The Apostle Paul tells us, "we are a new creation, the old passes away, behold God makes all things new!" (2 Corinthians 5) If we are created in the image of God, then we are created to create.

The Bible begins "when the Creator began creating", a Holy Wind swept over the waters, and God spoke, "Let there be light." Light appeared. God saw how good the light was. God spoke into existence sky, sea and land. The Creator sang as "the earth brought forth plants, fruit, flowers and trees." On day four God, made the sun, moon, and stars so that we could tell time and know to cease our productivity for times of Sabbath. God saw how good that was too. God filled the sky with birds and the sea with fish. On day six, God made the land animals and after a pause said, "Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us ..." The Creator created humanity in the Creator's own image, in the divine image God created us... God blessed us, "take care

of this world I have created for you.” Finally the Creator stepped back from Creation, looking over everything, and declared it all “supremely good”.

Can we overcome the market God’s critical eye and look at ourselves as people God calls: “supremely good”? Often when I pause before a mirror, I hear the world’s judging call: “Your hair is too grey. Is that too much product? You need to lose weight. That shirt is dated.... Hurry up you need to...” Let us stop before a mirror and spot the beauty: “You are made in the image of God, male to female, grey to jet black, bald to blonde, queer to straight, running to rolling. Our Creator declares us: “supremely good!” Stop: spot God’s Beauty.

Now, some folks treat this Creation liturgy more like science than poetry, even as light comes before the stars and the two Creation stories contain ordering issues. In Genesis one, God speaks and humanity emerges, there is no muddy shaping, no time lag before God shapes Eve from Adam’s rib and no search for Adam’s kindred spirit among the eagles or elephants. Furthermore, some literalists make too much of the words “created male and female.” God’s image does not dwell in anatomy or in a binary gender code. Steve Harper notes that as God created plants and animals “each according to its kind”, and there is an incredible creative diversity within life! The ostrich and hummingbird are kinds of birds! The sea slug and the great white shark represent a grand scepter of “fish.” The redbud and the redwood show God’s creativity with trees! We are not defined by fixed binary gender roles. David declares Jonathan’s love as “better than that of a woman”. Solomon’s dress rivaled the wildflowers. Deborah led the nation. Jesus never married. Our biology does not hold the Divine Image. Perhaps, “created male and female” is more about the beautiful potential of human relationships. Perhaps, our ability to Love holds the Divine “DNA”? “God is Love” and Love is the only way we see God. (1 John 3-4) Jesus calls us to Love God, love neighbor, love strangers, and love even enemies. Paul celebrated “the Love of God within us”. Perhaps, the image of God within us is Love.

I wonder if some of you are asking about the Fall. Does humanity’s crossing of boundaries and misuse of the creation undo the goodness of God’s creation? Does a stray beer can destroy the beach? Did you grow up with a theology of a hard Fall? Did you learn that human sin was more powerful than our Creators’ goodness? When I first heard the concept of “original blessing”, or that “God created us with sacred worth”, it took me years to believe. I grew up being labeled as a sinner. Yes, we sin, we cross boundaries, we crave forbidden fruit, we trust snakes, we misuse resources, we blame others, we cover up, and we hide from God. But friends, the human Fall does not undo Almighty God’s original blessing. Our collective sin in Genesis 3-4 did not undo the divine proclamations of Genesis 1. Yes, stray beer cans degrade the beach and sin hurts our living, but God still loves us and our world. Jesus says to us, “You are the light of the world-shine goodness.” Stop and spot the beauty! John proclaims, “God so loved the world.” The Bible is not the story of sinners in the hands of an angry God. It is the story of God’s love from the creation, through the manger crib, to the cross! The Creator never stops loving us. Stop and spot beauty.

Hear Isaiah’s song: “But now, says the Lord— the one who created you, you tricksters, the one who formed you, you strivers: Don’t fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.” Look at the mirror, and imagine the Lord speaking, “You are mine: scars and crowns, fat and muscles, fears and hopes, failures and victories, tears and laughter... You are Mine. I made you. You are beautifully made.” Stop and Spot the beauty.

Hear Jesus' lullaby of Divine economics, "Aren't two sparrows sold for a few dollars? But not even one sparrow falls to the ground apart from our Holy Parent's care. Even the hairs of your head are all counted. Don't be afraid. You are of infinite worth." As a child my mother's lap seemed the safest space in the world. I could lay there safely, as she ran her long fingers through my hair. She spoke no words about my latest failed test or lack of courage to ask someone to the middle school dance. She just gently combed my hair with her fingers. Isaiah tells us God longs to hold us as a mother cradling us in her divine lap. She counts our hairs: Seven thousand five hundred and forty one. Seven thousand five hundred and forty two. Seven thousand five hundred and forty three. You are of infinite worth. You are worth so much more than you can even dream. God loves you enough to lay in the cradle and take up the cross. You are created in the very image of God. You are made with sacred worth. Oh, you may screw up 7x70 times, but the Great God of the Universe is standing in the driveway- waiting to embrace and hold you even as you still stink like a pig-stye. You are of sacred worth. Spot the beauty.

A child, affectionately named "King James" by his attentive and indulgent grandfather, who kept James entertained with grand adventures every Friday, sat down for Children's Moments. Growing bored with the too-complex object lesson, James laid down flat on his back across the chancel rail. Ignoring his mom's quiet pleas, James laid out looking straight up at the chandelier with a newfound perspective on church. James spotted the golden Crucifer atop it's wooden pole and intrigued by the shiny goodness kind of back-stroked his way across the floor until he lay directly under the Crucifer. Did James note his parents frustrated gestures and gentle calls? The pure delight of discovery danced across Jame's face as with one hand he slowly spun the Crucifier around and around in it's sturdy base. Half the choir broke into steady and difficult to suppress laughter. The other half would soon wish that their preacher would not snorted an undignified but child affirming laugh. This child was having a moment. Perhaps, our more reserved friends sympathised with the parents' exasperated expressions. We who laughed knew we should be on the parents' side. No they doubt had told James many times to "sit up and behave". As the closest adult, I let James enjoy this newfound perspective on church. Who could resist the delight of a child sliding on his back across boundaries? It is all beautiful: parents befuddled at disobedience, while grandfathers smile, and preachers laugh as a child heeds curiosity. Later that week, I learned that if you lay flat on your back across the chancel around 11am, depending on the season, and you squint your eyes just right, then the reds, blues and golds of Tullahoma's sainted glass windows will reflect off a spinning Crucifier like a sanctified kaleidoscope. Look for beauty. Amen.