

Sermon

Fellowship of Hope

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Frank Wilczek is a physicist, about my age, and a Nobel Prize winning physicist at that. He, along with two colleagues, won the prize for Physics in 2004 "for the discovery of [asymptotic freedom](#) in the theory of the [strong interaction](#)." I have no idea what that means, but I like the sound of it—it even sounds vaguely theological to me. I heard him interviewed recently by Krista Tippett and he was talking about beauty as a compass for truth.

That caught my attention. Hey, wait a minute, lots of truth is ugly, I argue back. That seems incontestable. Oppression, exploitation, sin are all about as ugly as ugly gets. And about as real as real gets—so, certainly true, in that sense. And, I also argue back, when someone says to me: "Mary, you've just got to face facts, "I'm not usually thinking—oh, how beautiful this is going to be.

And there's an argument on the other side as well. Not everything that is beautiful is true. I confess that mostly what comes to mind here are Hollywood stars with their perfect skin, humongous eyes, and perfectly coiffed hair. Or, even without the Botox, the make-up, the hair-spray, the saying that we've all heard way too many times—beauty is only skin deep.

But notice that Wilczek isn't saying that truth is beauty or beauty is truth. Beauty is a compass, a point of orientation for the truth. What Frank Wilczek has found in a life time of studying quantum physics is that, finally, the theories that prove to be true, after long, hard, work, years of collaboration and testing, lots of sweat and late hours, often turn out to have a certain beauty about them. There is symmetry and balance. There is a sense of rightness; a sense of realities meshing, fitting together, working with precision and completion. As a physicist, he learns from and takes joy in that beauty. It is a compass for the truth. Beauty is an indicator and teacher of truth—a sign, if you will.

Wilczek also reminds me of something that my good friend, fellow teacher at the seminary, and partner in various projects over the years, both serious and not so serious, Perry Yoder, often said. When we were working with students in evaluating interpretations of biblical texts, both others and their own, he would ask—is the interpretation elegant? Does it explain, but not overly explain? Is it more revelatory of the text than your own ego? Does it have a certain beauty?

It is to that sense of beauty as compass, as criterion, as teacher, that our texts for today call us. It is to that sense of beauty which the Sovereign God summons us as Christians, as beloved, as those remembering whose we are. It is that sense of beauty that accompanies us as we live our lives in faith.

It is, after all, Transfiguration Sunday. It is the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany. This coming week, we head into Ash Wednesday and then Lent. If on any day of the liturgical year, beauty should be on our minds, it should be on our minds this day. The dawning of light out of darkness, the glory of God as reflected in the incarnate face of Jesus, the transformation of all that is mundane and ordinary into the holy space and time on the mountain, here in this culmination of Epiphany, let us take a moment to think about the importance of beauty as we live out our intention to follow Jesus on the way.

All four of the lectionary texts for today, speak of beauty in one way or another. In 2 Kings 2:1-12, we read the story of the interaction between Elijah and Elisha as Elijah is being taken away from earth by flaming horses and a chariot of fire. There are two kinds of beauty to notice in this text. The first is the simple beauty of the relationship between Elijah and Elisha. This last journey that the two will take together happens in three stages. They proceed from Gilgal to Bethel; then from Bethel to Jericho; finally from Jericho to the Jordan. At each stage Elijah tries to spare Elisha. Stay here, he tells the younger prophet. At each stage, Elisha persists: "As the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you," he says. The beauty of their relationship is in the strength of devotion between them—the inevitable tension between Elijah's desire to protect his mentee and Elisha's insistence on staying the course with his mentor.

The beauty of their friendship leads to the beauty of their shared vision—the glimpse of holy glory as the flaming horses and chariot of fire descend and ascend—as Elisha receives, as the gift of God in Elijah's departure, the shining glory of that vision, and, with it, a double portion of Elijah's spirit.

The first part of Psalm 50 is awash with the inseparable union of beauty and justice. God establishes justice; God acts as judge, out of beauty. The beauty out of which God emerges as judge is both the beauty of the world God created and the beauty of the humanity God created. The Psalm speaks of the beauty of sunrise and sunset, of fire and wind, of the heavens above and the earth below. The Psalm also speaks of the beauty of Zion, or Jerusalem as it was created to be, and the beauty of humanity as God created humanity to be—for faith and covenant.

The beauty of creation, both world and human, is the ground, the basis, the starting point, the orientation of God's justice and God's judgment.

Paul, in 2 Corinthians 4:3-6, reminds us that the glory, or beauty of God, continues to be a starting point for the standard of judgment or justice. To those pursuing the way of death, to those giving themselves over to destroying others rather than building others up, the beauty of the Gospel is hidden. Those committed to the rewards of the world are blind to the glory of God, the beauty of God, which is before them in many ways, but certainly in the face of Jesus. The way to live by the light that shines out of the darkness is the way of regarding the cross ravaged face of Jesus Christ as the beautiful icon of the God who pronounced him the beloved at his baptism. Those who turn their faces from the glory of God to the rewards of this world are those who have forgotten that the human beings that God created are the images of God's beauty, and are God's beloved.

Mark 9, the Gospel story for today, is likewise a text describing the beauty of God. Jesus takes three companions, Peter, James, and John, and goes up into the high mountains. While they are all up there, and most likely praying, because that is what Jesus tends to do on mountains, they are visited by the glory of God. Jesus himself becomes—different—with his clothes shining with an unearthly brilliance and he is joined by figures that Mark identifies for us as Moses and Elijah. Moses who didn't make it to the promised land and whose bones were never found, and the very Elijah that got taken up by the horses and chariots of fire in 2 Kings.

Peter, ever practical and ever irrepressible, jumps into action. He has an idea and wants to execute it—he's going to pitch some tents, three tents for three beautiful, and holy, people.

It seems like a good response—recognizing the significance of the moment and doing something to preserve that moment. But it is not to be. Before Peter can figure out the tent thing, a cloud wraps itself around them. The word associated with the cloud is the same word associated with the Holy Spirit in Luke 1:35 when it wraps itself around Mary and incarnation takes place. It is also the word associated with Peter's shadow in Acts 5:15 when sick people are put into Peter's path so his shadow wraps around them and healing takes place. Out of this cloud, this enfolding, pregnant with the power of God, the voice speaks: "This one is my son, my beloved one, listen to him."

We sometimes understand this story, especially Peter's part in it with the three tents he wants to stake out, as telling us that we can't stay on the mountain top of our religious experience. We can go to youth convention, but we can't stay there. We can be baptized, or speak in tongues, or have an epiphany, but we can't live at those heights. We can experience the beauty of God in a way that transports us, transcends us, transfigures us, but that's not real life, somehow. Peter was, after all, absolutely right. You can't live on the mountain top. Or, at least, if you're going to try and live on the mountain top, you'd better have a tent. And some food to eat. And a way to keep warm. And a way to keep yourself and all those brilliant clothes clean. So you can't live up there for very long before you start running into some very practical problems.

But another way to understand this story is that we come down from the mountaintop, not as second best, but to look here in the valleys and the lowlands more hospitable to human habitation for the beauty of God that we experienced in the austere and jagged highlands. The God of the mountain is here, down below, with us, with all of the divine beauty and truth on offer. God is with us in love and that reality is both true and beautiful.

To re/member that love; to look for it in all the everyday places we go and in all the everyday jobs we do and in all the everyday people we meet along the way is our calling as Christians, those who are God's beloved. Terry Tempest Williams, writer and naturalist, claims unapologetically and without equivocation that "If we follow our heart's path of unconditional love and service in the name of Beauty, we will be on a path toward God on Earth."

To be on that path, my beloved fellow Hoppers, is the place where truth and beauty come together and offer the weary world a saving grace. It is that path, which in this time of covid, calls for our attention and our commitment. My sister, Ann, and I call each other every morning to see if we are still alive and still all right. What we are finding, is that small gifts of beauty are getting us through, getting us closer, to each other, to our worlds, and to God. The flit of a blue jay in a prickly Holly bush on a Kentucky mountain slope; the startling red of a cardinal against a snowy cedar along an Indiana fence row. The warmth of laughter burbling between us as we stand in each other's shoes, not out of obligation, but out of love.

We are indeed, as we sang last Sunday, summoned by the God who made us. “Radiant risen from the water, robed in holiness and light, every person in God’s image, every person, God’s delight.”

Let us then, behold the beauty of the world God created; let us then, behold the stunning beauty that God sees in each one of us. May we walk in beauty these days of our lives.