

The Beauty of God
Sunday, May 1, 2022, 11:30 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Dr. Sally Howard

“When the divine beauty within us, yearning to shape the pieces of our lives into wholes of positive meaning, collaborates with the Divine Lover and the Artist Extraordinaire, our beauty unfolds and we create the beauty of beloved community wherever we go.”

Ode to the Living and excerpt from a poem by Gabriel Dubransky

*And this woman is the subject of an ode I never met,
so Her dream must be mine;
to find beauty in all but the self
So sweet tragedy can find me and I can host
A funeral for my knee-high black lace-up boots
And I can become the next oded woman who dances
But I will not
She knew only of a world where there was no beauty without tragedy
And there was no life without beauty
So to die beautiful was to live forever
But I will not die for an ode
So this is an ode to me
To the beauty in not dying, not yet,*

Good morning All Saints! These words came from a poem written and read by one of our youth in last Sunday’s 11:30 service. I hope you were able to be with us here or online, and if you weren’t, run don’t walk to our website to hear the rock cantata and liturgy offered by our youth choirs, under the amazing direction of Jenny Tisi.

Well, perhaps wait until after this service! But please don’t miss the beauty and power of our children’s voices. Experience their groundedness in God’s love, groundedness that has been nourished also by the expertise and devotion of the youth and children’s ministers, Nina Scherer and Ben Boquist. Their voices still reverberate in my body and soul. Their beauty brought me closer to God.

You know, beauty does that!

We hear it in music, in the drumming circle.

We experience it in the intricate web of life whose complexity defies our cognitive capture. We live in a nonlinear universe in which unity across diversity is at the heart of reality, but in which

we never know whether a long standing pattern will change with the flutter of a butterfly's wings, or only after generations of hard work and effort. I experience beauty in the poetry of prophets and slam poets, both seized by the Spirit of God. I see it in the eyes of friends and family who really know me, and who see what's deepest and truest about me even on my worst days. I feel it every Sunday when I look out and see your faces, and take the hands of our children as they bless our table. Or in colleagues, like Terry Knowles, whose grace and humor carry the day.

And I feel it every time I read an old recipe my mother or my grandmother carefully scripted for me. They all bring me closer to God because God is beauty, immeasurable goodness. Divine beauty is incommensurate with any and all created goods or ills.

God's inner being is written everywhere, strewn around us like pearls in a parking lot, like love letters tucked into a pocket, like treasure hidden in every field.

God is the Artist Extraordinaire, always pouring into other things as much goodness as they can hold.

Let's see the beauty of God the artist, in our gospel story today.

It starts on the shores of Lake Tiberius, the same shores on which Jesus gathered disciples. The name of the lake itself, formerly the Sea of Galilee, had been colonized by Herod in an attempt to gain political favor with Rome. All of the fish caught were heavily taxed, further impoverishing an already economically marginalized population.

Many had hoped that Jesus would throw off empire dominance. Instead, he was brutally murdered. Even though Jesus has appeared three times before, there is doubt, disorientation and trauma.

Trauma and horror have life ruining potential. We all know this in some way or another.

We are exquisite meaning makers and our personalities and very sanity depend on a sense of positive meaning and purpose to our lives. Horrendous evil done to us or observed, can engulf the positive meaning of our lives and the world in one big gulp.

Furthermore, as human beings, we can't avoid some contribution to suffering and degradation, from carbon footprints, to participation in structures of economic or racial inequality. There is also just plain day to day amnesia to who we truly are and to Whom we belong. It's enough to arrest our ability to imagine a future and a story different from our present.

This is the space in which Peter dwells as the gospel story begins. He is fishing the sea once again, trying to return to normal life—to find some meaning and purpose beyond being a

disciple of Jesus. We imagine he is probably heavily burdened by guilt and confusion. How do you follow one who is gone? How do you repair the what ifs or should have beens? Like Mary before him, or the disciples on the road to Amenus, when Jesus appears on the shore, Peter doesn't recognize who he is. What is different about Jesus in the time after the resurrection that makes him so hard to recognize? Nobody sees what they used to see. Perhaps it is that God does not always look the way we expect—sometimes to the point, that we don't recognize Her in our midst. Perhaps it is the way that trauma can stunt our ability to imagine any future other than the bleak present. But Jesus shows the love. "There are fish over there," and there are! Good friends celebrate together sharing their catch around a bonfire. It is living the way of connection and abundance.

In Peter's case, it isn't until he hears Jesus' voice of tenderness that Peter comes out of the daze. A voice of tenderness and compassion. Peter jumps into the water—with an immediacy that we recognize as his style, and he swims to shore.

Jesus understands trauma! and restoration and recovery for Peter begins.

Jesus does not blame or shame Peter. Jesus does not ask for Peter's repentance.

He asks if Peter loves him. Jesus meets Peter's vulnerability with his own, and in doing so, he begins to restore the positive meaning of Peter's life. Even after Peter's abandonment and betrayal, Jesus wants Peter's love. Our God who is beauty loves vulnerability, and risks with us, being torn and fractured in this world of change. God stands with us even when we can't imagine it. The God who is beauty meets us where we are with never ending compassion. Even God's anger emerges from the pain of connection to us, to our lost potential for good and from the harm we cause to a world God birthed.

I have often wondered about the meaning of Jesus's asking Peter three times.

There are near volumes of commentaries written about it. One interpretation is that the word Jesus used for love is agape, unconditional love. But Peter responded with his own word meaning filial love. That is until the third time, when Jesus changed his language to Peter's point of reference, asking if Peter loved him like a friend or brother.

God who is beauty hears us and speaks our language until we can hear how unconditionally loved we are.

Yet God the Artist extraordinaire does even more. Jesus asks Peter three times to assure Peter, not Jesus, that his three denials have been noted and dismissed. This is restorative—God always making opportunities for us to heal. Each question pulls Peter back from the horror around him and the despair of failure that engulfs him, toward what is deepest within him.

Which is love undivided with the love and the beauty of God. That is our core, the brilliant diamond blazing with the glory of God. It can't be tarnished—not by hate, or trauma, or all the false messages we take in about ourselves that diminish our light.

Jesus brings Peter from the trauma place to the grace place, grounding him in the God who is love and beauty, that dwells in him, until Peter begins to see the beauty in himself. The glory of God is a human being fully alive. That love never dies.

Every creature and all of the universe is infused with the beauty and breath of God—no matter how buried or distorted that beauty might be.

This is what we mean when we say God dwells in you—all is sacramental—God in all things and contained by no thing. God includes all of us and invites all of who we are into the warmth of God's extravagant love and abundance, so that we may feed each other and care for the earth.

Remember this—that we love because we are first loved. Jesus grounds Peter in his love for him and Peter's truest self that loves Jesus back. Then, he sends him back to do the work of love and restoration in the world. To help absolutely everyone else know the beauty of God which is deepest within them. Jesus absorbs the pain and restores positive meaning and purpose to Peter's life. That power of beauty is available to us every minute of every day.

When trauma leaves us floundering so that the story of our lives is like a feather blowing in the wind, we need the plot resolution of an incredibly resourceful Artist!

And here it is! God Our Artist Extraordinaire does and will always bring wholeness out of fracture, and life out of death. In mystery, God promises to restore positive meaning and purpose in all our lives, from our perspective, not just God's. God created us as mortal and God does and will take care of what we cannot take care of ourselves.

This is the Word, the blueprint from the beginning of time, built into the foundations of the universe. When the divine beauty within us, yearning to shape the pieces of our lives into wholes of positive meaning, collaborates with the Divine Lover and the Artist Extraordinaire, our beauty unfolds and we create the beauty of beloved community wherever we go.

I opened with Gabriel's poem in which they declared and expressed the beauty and creativity of their truest self. The glory of God in a human being fully alive!

May the grace of love this day grant us the insight of God within us and around us that we may be beauty and courage in our world. Amen.