

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday December 9, 2018 Advent 2C
Text: Baruch 5: 1-9
Luke 1: 68-79
Preacher: The Rev. Christopher McLaren
Title: Walking in Beauty

*Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem,
and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God.
Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God;
put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting;
-- Baruch 5*

This exquisite piece of Hebrew poetry delivers a message of consolation written to the exiled people of Israel during a time of suffering and desolation. It is imaginative literature that envisions a new future for the people of Israel as they long for a time to rebuild their damaged city, their Temple, their nation and their lives. It is a poetic message that many here at St. Mark's might feel is true of this place after 9 years of rebuilding this beloved community of faith. In so many ways we are living out this vision from Baruch, even though it may be the first time that we are really hearing these beautiful words or being stirred by the images of this wisdom writer. What could be more perfect in this season of Advent than an invitation to put on beauty as we contemplate the holy mystery of God coming among us as a vulnerable child born at Bethlehem.

The exiled people of Israel are bidden to take off the garments of sorrow and affliction and to put on beauty, to begin to look and act and walk in the ways of God. Interestingly one of the names for God in the Orthodox tradition is, "The One who is beauty." This is a wonderful invitation to the people of God, a poem of passion and encouragement about becoming the beautiful people God intended for them to be.

One of my favorite spiritual writers, Martin L. Smith, in reflecting on the season of Advent says, "We might occasionally hear in church a prayer that makes passing use of the phrase 'the beauty of holiness', but it can't be claimed that we are helped very often to feel that the contagious goodness of God is absolutely lovely, alluring, and attractive. **We are called to be beautiful human beings.**"

Did you hear that? We are called to be beautiful human beings. I wonder is that the message the church offers today? Is that the way you would summarize the Good News of Jesus Christ that we celebrate breaking into the world?

I'm not talking about outward beauty, beauty that is only skin deep, but a kind of inward beauty that radiates from within; a forgiven and forgiving people, a people caught up in a love-affair with God in such a way that it makes us beautiful, alive, and attractive to the world around us.

I think that many of us have had enough of ugly Christians. Too many of us have been the victims of self-righteous attacks and holier-than-thou encounters that have left us wondering if we really want to be associated with what passes for Christianity in this beloved country of ours. In a recent class here at St. Mark's one of our members talked about how some Christians use the Bible as a weapon. We laughed uncomfortably as she described the clobber passages because almost all of us have been hit over the head by those who claim to be followers of Jesus but are trying to wound with the sacred scriptures rather than heal.

Some would argue that the church is an ugly and broken place weighed down by its many conflicts and divisions. Andrew Sullivan wrote in a Newsweek cover story titled, *Christianity in Crisis*, that Christianity is being destroyed by politics, priests, and get rich evangelists. He felt that it would trouble and baffle Jesus of Nazareth. He went on to say:

The issues that Christianity obsesses over today simply do not appear in the New Testament... Is it any accident that so many Christians now embrace materialistic self-help rather than ascetic self-denial... [and] no surprise that the fastest growing segment of belief among the young is atheism, which has leapt in popularity in the new millennium. Nor is it a shock that so many have turned away from organized Christianity.

Some of us, and I count myself among them, are in the Episcopal Church because we found in it a beauty that we longed for in our spiritual journey. We were attracted by its emphasis upon grace rather than judgment, by the warmth and depth of its liturgy, and by its strong practice of building a thick community. Some of us are here to recover from the spiritual abuse of our childhood traditions or our sojourns in other damaging branches of the faith. We've been beaten up by "religious types" and those who were sure that their way was in fact the only way. We're understandably nervous about being associated with angry, hate-filled Christianity, and guilt by association is still a powerful deterrent to really embracing the fullness of a faith that promises us the beauty of holiness that St. Paul reminds us is rooted and grounded in love.

In Ephesians 3: 16-19 we read about the radical love of Christ:

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Making the choice to root and ground your life in the love of Christ is a lifelong journey. A journey that begins with a surprise, a moment when you realize that there is this loving presence in the universe that is not distant but near and reaching out to you, in your particular life and inviting you to become joined to that loving presence. While this invitation comes to us freely, the invitation to respond is costly and full of risk just as any relationship that holds so much promise.

To become a Christian, a follower of Jesus, is to bet your life on this love, to believe that God's love is at the center of all things and that it is above all else trustworthy like nothing else in all the universe is trustworthy. The surprise of Christ's love is that it overwhelms us in a way that does not destroy us but rather fills us and draws us into the person we have always been destined to become. The love of Christ overwhelms our understanding, shatters our restrictive categories, breaks open our hearts and animates our imagination and vision.

Being rooted and grounded in love is a difficult thing to describe really. You might liken it to being at a concert of your favorite singer or group, a beautiful place on the green grass with trees overhead and feeling as though the music is not only surrounding you but that it has entered you and that your whole body and being is vibrating with this music, reverberating with its rhythms and meaning, filling you to the point of bursting. It is as if you are part of the music and the music is part of you and you are for a moment fully alive to the song, its meaning, its movement, its life.

Baruch bids us to "put on forever the beauty of the glory from God (Baruch 5)." The Psalmist sings, "Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness" [Psalm 96: 9]. St. Paul prays, that the love of Christ, "may dwell in our hearts through faith."

It is the love of Christ dwelling in us that makes us beautiful. It is a beauty that emanates from the inside out, from the very presence of God within us. Here in this place gathered as a people in search of the beauty of holiness we absorb and learn and incorporate into our very lives the love of Christ, endeavoring to place this love at the core of our being. This is what Sunday morning is about, what the Holy Eucharist intends, what all of this singing and processions and candles and flowers and music and poetry and song and

peace-making and prayers and bowing and kneeling and silence is for, to open us up to the beauty of God's holiness, to soften our hearts to receive a savior, to make home in our souls for love that changes everything.

I like what Urban T. Holmes said about our Episcopal faith tradition, "At is at its best, its liturgy, its poetry, its music and its life can create a world of wonder in which it is very easy to fall in love with God. "

If we want to know the depth and breadth of Christ's love, we are called outside of ourselves, outside of our comfort zones where we become not self-reliant but rather dependent upon the strength that comes from belonging to one another in community and to belonging to the One who is beauty, who is the source of love that holds everything in being.

This love of Christ transforms our inner lives but it does not stop there. To live in this love is to find ourselves constantly stretched and challenged by our own limitations. Rather than perpetuate our own prejudices or reinforce our own ways or systems, the love of God is always fearlessly confronting all that perpetuates injustice, all that destroys creation, all that protects greed, all that divides humanity from one another, all that extols selfish ambition over the good of all.

Advent is a fertile time to listen carefully for the Word who summons us to be walking sacraments of God's radiant beauty. The world has had more than enough of ugly Christians condemning and fighting. It is time for Christians to walk in beauty.

To walk in God's beauty, to be a beautiful people for God is not easy. Our culture is constantly tempting us to be rooted and grounded elsewhere rather than in the deep love of Christ. So, it takes a conscious commitment to practices and habits that will sustain us for the long-term. Practices like placing worship at the center of our lives, welcoming all who walk through our doors, taking the risk to service, initiating deep conversations, building relationships in and beyond the church, nurturing our spiritual lives in creative and deep ways, having fun together and celebrating beauty through art, music and more.

Perhaps you know the next step that you need to take to walk in beauty, to experience the fullness of Christ's love. If you become quiet and attentive this Advent season, you will discover what step you need to take to open your life up to the wild love of Christ. You know the tender place that God wants to make beautiful within you so that you too can shine with the Love of Christ.

It might be:

- Taking some Sabbath time to renew yourself.
- Becoming involved with ministry to the homeless.
- Starting a spiritual reading group.
- Spending time really listening to your children
- Taking the first step and finally walking into that AA meeting.
- Saying no to the promotion that will only complicate and distract your life.
- Making an effort to work through some painful issues you've been avoiding with a counselor.
- Getting up a few minutes early to sit in the quiet and listen for the still small voice of God.
- Daring to say I forgive you after all these months or years and letting go of the resentment that has you trapped.

You know love comes more through surrender than it does through us making it all happen. So, allow yourself to embrace the beauty of God's holiness, allow yourself to fall into the loving arms of Christ this Advent. As the scriptures tell us it is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God but it is also a beautiful thing.

There is a Navajo Night Chant I once heard sung in a church that took my breath away. It is part of a stunning longer Night Chant that I hope someday to have the privilege of hearing chanted in the Navajo language. The small part of this chant that I know will make a beautiful end and invitation for each of us on this Advent Sunday, to become **walking sacraments of God's radiant beauty**. So, as you hear this invitation to walk in beauty, consider what that one step is for you and imagine yourself taking that step as you walk in the beauty of Christ's love.

In beauty happily I walk. I beauty happily I walk. With beauty before me I walk. With beauty behind me I walk. With beauty below me I walk. With beauty above me I walk. It is finished inn beauty. It is finished in beauty.

--Navajo Night Chant

I am indebted to Martin L. Smith for his brief but evocative comments about Baruch especially for the notion of Christians as walking sacraments of God's radiant beauty. I am also deeply indebted to the writing of Wesley Granberg-Michaelson in an article entitled Sheer Christianity found in Sojourners Magazine November 2012 issue. I first heard the Navajo Night Chant used at a Eucharistic Liturgy at St. Gregory of Nyssa San Francisco and at the Sophia Conference at Camp Allen in the summer of 2000.