

Divine Ambiguity

February 19, 2023

“Nothing Gold Can Stay”

You probably won't believe it, but that little bundle of energy who is my daughter who came up for the children's time sat still on my lap for two minutes last week! I nuzzled her hair, drank in her scent, gloried at the weight of her in my arms – oh, how I savored it; my heart swelled – and I wanted it to last forever. But just as quickly as that glorious time of sweetness began, it ended, as she pushed off of my lap and decided the dog needed to be chased around the kitchen island.

Scott and I have talked a lot as parents about how fleeting the glorious bits of childhood are. We've talked about wanting to record the sound of our daughter's tiny little footsteps running down the hall, knowing that all too soon, that gleeful sound will change into something else. Robert Frost wrote “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” a reflection on the fact that so much that is good and beautiful and dear can't be captured or nailed down or held onto.

Today, we celebrate the Transfiguration, the end of our season of Epiphany, or season of light. It began with the story of the Magi following the light of the star, and ends with the Gospel lesson we read today, in which three of Jesus' disciples go up a mountain with him and have a glorious, albeit short lived, experience. Like a parent's experience of their baby's first true belly laugh, Peter wants to hold on to the magnificence they are experiencing. He offers to build something to make this ephemeral experience they're having more permanent, but it just can't be done. Beauty and glory of this magnitude have to be experienced in the now.

Divine Ambiguity

Today after worship, we're all invited upstairs to the church hall for the opening of a marvelous art exhibit by Sheboygan artist Toril Fisher, called Divine Ambiguity. The exhibit features twelve paintings Fisher has made, depicting deeply vulnerable people, many with halos behind them.

As I wrote to you this week, the symbolism isn't intended to be subtle. A divine light radiates out of these people on the edges, these people on the margins, these people who society has cast aside. I encourage you to take the elevator to the second floor sometime between now and when the show wraps up on Easter Sunday, to have the experience of having the elevator doors open to reveal the beautiful, shimmering gold of the little boy in a cage. It's mesmerizing.

Before talking with Fisher, it never occurred to me that an artist would paint the figure, in this case a little toddler, before adding the bars of the cage over his fully formed face and body. She says she wept as she caged him. I weep now, telling you about it. And I hope this piece or another brings you to tears, too.

Maybe it won't be the child in a cage that hits you in the solar plexus. Maybe it will be the “Black Youth in America.” Where Fisher chose to hang this painting is artful, too, as the young man is off in a corner. Is he trying not to make waves, trying not to be seen, or have we put him there, out of the way? In either case, Fisher captures the solitude and the weight this young man carries.

Or maybe you'll be moved to tears by "What Now," the haunting piece Fisher painted of Afghan women as the last U.S. planes left Kabul, when you learn that, just like the way that she fully painted the toddler first and then painted the cage over him, so, too, she painted the faces of all three women, and wept as she then painted the burkas over them. There are women under those burkas, many of whom had hope in the possibility of societal reform, and who now...do not.

Transfiguration

In both our reading from Exodus today and our Gospel, we hear of magnificent experiences of the Divine. In Exodus, Moses traveled up Mount Sinai, received the law, and encountered God. We didn't read the portion of the passage in which he comes back down the mountain and is literally glowing because he has encountered God. If we had, we would have heard that his face was so radiant that he had to wear a veil to cover it, lest he blind the people he encountered.

In Matthew, we heard of Jesus, Peter, James, and John going up a high mountain. Again, the symbolism isn't subtle. Mountaintop experiences often take our breath away.

Add that to the fact that the writer of the Gospel of Matthew is trying to portray Jesus as the new Moses, and the symbolism just keeps heaping on. Like Moses, they went up the mountain. Like Moses, they're suddenly enveloped in a cloud. Like Moses, the voice of God speaks to them from the cloud. And, like Moses, Jesus' face shone like the sun.

In our scripture texts, when people encounter both Moses and Jesus after their experiences of the Divine, that divinity radiates out of them. Is it the energy of God bouncing off of them? Or, is it the Divine within them finally revealed?

Conclusion

Ask yourself that when you go upstairs for coffee hour today and throughout Lent and see the halo behind the "Missing and Murdered Indigenous Woman." Is it the energy of God bouncing off of her? Or, is it the Divine within her that Fisher recognized, and that she is inviting us to recognize, celebrate, and honor?

Ralph Waldo Emerson said:

"That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our life and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshiping we are becoming."

That's what this is really about, isn't it? What we are worshiping we are becoming, and as people of faith and followers of Jesus, we have a responsibility to make the things that dominate our imaginations and our thoughts be the priorities and values of God.

Friends, part of why I asked Fisher to hang this marvelous body of work in our church hall is because I want these vulnerable people to be our companions throughout Lent. I want them to be part of our coffee hour and youth group dinners and movie nights in which we watch documentaries about prophetic lives together. Even more, as you're thinking about how you're

going to observe Lent this year, perhaps you might simply take the pamphlet from the art exhibit home with you and keep revisiting it. Maybe choose two paintings a week to ponder and read about. You might be moved to learn more about the vulnerable population depicted, or you may simply allow yourself the space to feel the grief and anguish of them and their beloveds. Allow their vulnerability, their humanity, and their divinity to soften your heart and steel your resolve.

Perhaps this Lent for us could be less about giving something up or doing extra practices and more about reveling in the belovedness of all people and all creation, especially the most vulnerable. In her reflection on the piece entitled “Gender Euphoria,” Fisher writes:

“I’m a proud mama of a transgender young adult. Their name is Jules. I want to thank them for their courage to live as their authentic selves and shun the societal norms that are standing in the way of their self-actualization.”

She’s calling on all of us to recognize, celebrate, and protect the divinity radiating out of these lives that society is often so hostile toward.

I started out my reflection today noting that so many of the things that make our hearts swell with joy are ephemeral: the majesty of a mountaintop, the splendor of a sunset, the rarity of a toddler sitting still. Robert Frost was right, these experiences are fleeting. But the inherent dignity of every single person, their inherent belovedness by God, is eternal.

My prayer for all of us as we step into Lent, the church’s season of repentance and conversion, is that we will find ways to steep ourselves in that belovedness. That the inherent belovedness of all people will be what we worship. And that, in turn, we will do something with that belovedness.

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Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9
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