

And
First Sunday in Lent
February 26, 2023
The Rev. Katherine Bush

Frederick Buechner was a Presbyterian minister and writer; he died last summer. For some of us, he was our favorite Presbyterian. Since his death, I've borrowed some of his words to offer as words of blessing at the end of the service. You may have heard me say, "Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Do not be afraid." Completed with the traditional, "blessing of God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit be upon you and remain with you ... " Though there is this leeway for us clergy-folk when we offer a benediction, people tend to look up when you divert from the usual script. So, I've had a few conversations with y'all about this particular collection of words, "Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Do not be afraid." It seems to touch something in us. Last week someone stopped me to ask about the words and shared that they felt very true: *today* he said, *today is beautiful and terrible*. I nodded.

Another conversation about these short sentences came with this observation: *that sounds like a summary of life, and also like a summary of scripture*. I paused, not having thought about the words that way before, and then again, I nodded. "Here is the world," creation. "Beautiful and terrible things will happen," garden, exodus, prophets, exile, Jesus, revelation, yep. "Do not be afraid," the most frequently repeated instruction in the Bible. Though Buechner didn't necessarily intend for this to be a summary of the holy book (he was describing the phenomenon of grace in Wishful Thinking), it turns out it does work in that way; the formula holds up pretty much all the way through our scriptures.

And it certainly echoes in the stories we hear today. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Beautiful *and* terrible things. From the moment the story starts in beautiful Eden with all that the humans could ever want or need provided, including not only fruit to eat but also companionship in each other and meaningful work to till and keep the garden, there are also crafty, talking serpents and boundaries we shouldn't cross in that same garden. In the delightful, gorgeous world that God made, there are trees that will sustain and trees that will kill. "Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Do not be afraid."

The same is true for the wilderness into which Jesus journeys. He could probably still hear the extraordinary words of God ringing in his ears, "this is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased," when he finds himself alone, fasting, searching for something, but finding only temptation and its embodiment, Satan - offering him variations on the theme of power in exchange for his soul. After three rounds, the devil finally departs and the angels arrive. This longer scene we hear in Matthew is summed up in the Cliff's notes version of Mark like this, "He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." Do you see how, once again, it's all jumbled together? Even for Jesus? He finds Satan *and* wild beasts *and* angels. The world contains riverside baptisms *and* wild places of loneliness; the world offers words of blessing and invitations to stray. "Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Do not be afraid."

Last Saturday afternoon, I sat in the lobby of Playhouse on the Square with a couple dozen Calvary-ites and listened to Charles Shipp (the younger) talk with Jared Thomas Johnson. Jared was the director of The Scottsboro Boys play, and Charles filled a gallery with artwork inspired by the same story. The story, if you don't know, is painful; it's the unjust imprisonment of nine young men and the ripple effects of racism and bigotry. And Jared and Charles created beauty of a sort from that terror; beauty that in no way minimized the pain and horror but rather acts of creation that held up the brutality to say *here is the world, this is also true*. Jared and Charles reminded us that afternoon that we don't live in a world of beauty or terror, but in a world in which beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid to look and see and name and feel all of it.

One of the messages of Lent is that we ought not to be afraid to acknowledge the beautiful parts and the terrible parts of life. Lent rolls around every year whether you're feeling particularly penitential or not, just like Easter will arrive whether you're feeling particularly joyful or not. Sometimes our lives align with the church's liturgical seasons, but even when our lives are not in sync with the tone or the coloration of the church calendar, the rotation and change in seasons remind us that there is a time for everything. Our interior lives won't always align with our exterior circumstances, but we'll roll through all of it eventually. I have a friend from way upstate New York who marvels at our Southern ability to continue the walk through Lent when the signs of spring start popping out. For her, Lent means only gray banks of months-old snow, around here we have daffodils in jars, and soon more and more temperate, inviting days. Calvary in its own peripatetic wisdom moves between solemnity and Boston Cream pie, between the prophetic call of preachers and the warm embrace of friends we only see in the Mural Room in March. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Penitence and waffles too. Demons and angels. Freedom and boundaries. Laughter and silence. Art and cruelty. Wild places and Edens. Temptation and comfort.

You can name your own "ands," the mixed-up feelings and tasks, the jarring juxtaposition of wilderness and garden. We all live with these "and alsos." Grief and delight. Worry and hope. Music and violence. Abundance and scarcity. Guilt and forgiveness. In this Lenten moment, we use words like sin and temptation more than we regularly hear them. One of the sins we might name and repent of is the sin of thinking that God is only present in one side of all these bizarre pairings. The temptation is to believe that God is revealed only in the delight and not also in the grief, or that God lives in the places of hope or music and not also in the places of anxiety and hurt. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Do not be afraid.

There is an encouragement in the breadth of Scripture, in the story of Jesus, in the wisdom of a superficial church calendar: an encouragement to reject thinking in an either/or way and to choose an "and also" worldview. We are offered a vision that is a totality, a glimpse of the unified field, and when we open ourselves to the idea that all of everything is potentially sacred, we start seeing the world differently. All week I've noticed this thread and heard it and seen it in very disparate places: in that art gallery, in *the elegance of disorder* describing a poet; someone naming that our days hold space for tearful *mourning and magic*, another conversation about an avowed misanthrope who cultivated the most marvelous roses. It's like Whitman said, we contain multitudes. And we shouldn't listen to the voice of the tempter suggesting that God is only present on one side of a bifurcated life. Our lives are not reducible to exclusively beautiful days, and God is not absent on the terrible days. After all, some days are beautiful and terrible at the very same time. Surely the love of our God is woven into every contradictory, terrible, and beautiful detail. Here is the world, don't be afraid.