

The First Sunday of Advent

December 3, 2023

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An odd thing happens at the beginning of every church year. On the first Sunday of Advent, we hear that the world as we know it will soon come to an end. Isn't that strange? The lead up to Christmas and the most famous birth story of them all has us listening to the grownup Christ child tell his followers that a time is coming when the sun will go dark and the moon will give off no light. Stars will fall from the sky because the powers behind the whole universe apparently will be shaken.

It feels a little like someone hired The Doors to play your niece's first birthday party and Jim Morrison kicks things off with "This is the end. This is the end, my friend."

This particular Sunday also happens to be our first Sunday back in our newly renovated church. Suffice it to say that Mark 13 probably wouldn't be my go to gospel lesson for an occasion like this. But this, of course, is not the problem with our lectionary. It's why we have one. To make it a little harder for a preacher to pick scriptures that suit his purposes rather than grapple with what we don't already assume and understand.

I'll go ahead and make things even more confusing by pointing out that if we had started at verse one of Mark 13, where Jesus begins the teaching our reading comes from, we would have found him at the temple complex in Jerusalem, where a disciple comments how impressively big the stones and the buildings are. And Jesus says it's all going to be torn down one day. Not a single stone will be left in its place.

Kind of makes me feel a little silly that Richard Hendrix and I were here yesterday afternoon obsessing about how to put the modesty screens in front of the choir without scratching this new chancel floor.

So here's a question that reading this gospel on this particular day presses upon me. If ultimately nothing lasts, and if the end of everything is coming a lot sooner than we think, does it make sense to spend any of our time and energy and resources on beauty? And let's bring it even closer to home. In the Memphis we inhabit today, as we struggle with poverty and crime and violence, is beauty something we should be attending to at all?

Twenty-five years ago, Elaine Scarry wrote a book titled *On Beauty and Being Just*. She was pushing back on how she thought beauty had been diminished and disparaged in western civilization in the twentieth century. Two political criticisms were especially of interest to her.

One was that beauty distracts our attention from unjust social arrangements. You shouldn't waste time gazing at a painting or your daylilies or maybe even at your beloved when there's so much of the hard work of justice to be done. The second critique was that when we look at something because it is beautiful — especially when that something is a person — we diminish them and even do them harm by reducing them to an object.

But the ancients, going back to Plato, believed beauty was an essential aspect of reality. The good, the beautiful, and the true stood on equal footing. Augustine didn't live in a world that was less tumultuous and unjust than ours. Why did he call beauty "a plank amidst the waves of the sea?" As though beauty might be, not the first thing to let go of in an emergency, but the last thing to hang on to if you're drowning.

Elaine Scarry believed that, even if you're not some egghead philosopher who thinks attention to beauty does harm, we've all been conditioned by a society obsessed with efficiency and pragmatism. A society that would have us believe that beauty is something unnecessary added to the surface of things, and has little to do with what is good or what is true. We're probably less inclined to believe that beauty can save us than that we just need to get the right programs or legislation in place. If there's time after that for art, well, knock yourself out.

You've probably guessed that I found Elaine Scarry's argument mostly convincing. She described beautifully, if I may say, how we, not only do not do harm, but can actually

imbue even gardens and paintings with even more life when we enjoy their beauty. As a result, we set ourselves to caring for them more intensely.

What happens in the pit of your stomach when you imagine someone taking a box knife to the Mona Lisa or driving their car across the bed of zinnias your neighbor plants with care by the sidewalk each year? Maybe these feelings can be distractions from a pressing need in a moment, but can we really know what it means to make the world whole if we don't nurture our instinct to cherish and protect the smaller forms of wholeness and beauty we encounter in our lives? Isn't that impulse to care for and tend to and protect what we find beautiful intimately connected to the part of ourselves that longs to make a more just and beautiful world for all people?

So, what about the question of beauty in light of the warnings of Jesus we read about this morning? Maybe love of beauty needs to be cultivated in us if we're to play the long game in the realm of justice. But what if the world really is coming to an end? What's the old bumper sticker say? "Jesus is coming soon. Look busy!" Well, what would you want to be busy with if he walked into your life today? He tells us clearly in our gospel lesson that we need to be alert. We need to be paying expectant attention. But to what?

There's an apocryphal saying of Martin Luther's that may be even more interesting because it's apocryphal. Luther was thought to have said, "If I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree." But no one could actually find this line in any of his writings.

Luther, of course, is the guy who nailed his 95 Theses to the door of a church in Wittenberg, igniting the Protestant Reformation that was certainly one of those moments in world history worthy of Jesus's words at their most apocalyptic. Like the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, which the Romans really would carry out within a few decades of Mark's gospel, it's not just hyperbole to say the powers in the heavens were shaken in the 16th century Church. So it would be poignant if Luther were to have said he'd plant his apple tree even if he knew the world would end tomorrow. The world as he knew it was going to pieces, thanks in no small part to him.

But Luther didn't write those words, at least as far as we know. What scholars tell us is that the saying took hold in Nazi Germany among members of the Confessing Church. These were the Christians who refused to be complicit in Hitler's schemes, the most famous of them being Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was so committed to the cause that he returned to Germany, from the safety of a teaching post in New York, only to be executed at the Flossbürg concentration camp in April of 1945, only days before American troops arrived and liberated the prisoners.

It was Bonhoeffer's Confessing Church whose people clung to those legendary, apocryphal words of their forebear Martin Luther like a plank amidst the waves of their century's most terrible sea. These were people ready to die, not only for their faith, but for their Jewish brothers and sisters who were being systematically destroyed. They kept heart by reminding each other that if Jesus did come back tomorrow, even to their present Germany, they would be glad to be found, not only witnessing to justice and truth, but also tending to something as fragile and fruitful and beautiful as an apple tree that somebody had planted in God's green earth. What an astonishing witness they were.

It's not a silly or trivial question to ask whether you and I would want to be caught restoring an old church building if Jesus were to walk into downtown Memphis and look around tomorrow. He might well tell us to remember that all of this will fall down one day. That we can't invest our ultimate hopes in what is passing away, and nobody's bricks and stones stay stacked up forever.

But I do believe we can see ourselves as a generation who is passing through this place and asking what tending to this lovely old apple tree might look like today. I find this ramp to be both beautiful and just, making the communion rail accessible for the first time in our history to someone who can't navigate these steps.

A room like this one also just does something to people. I've seen it and felt it, and I'm sure you have too. I've watched` people walk into this space who may not be interested in the question of God, much less the strange rituals and antique texts modern Episcopalians apparently still take seriously somehow. And I've watched them grow quiet, touch things with a mixture of awe and care, begin to wonder what moves humans to make places like these over the centuries.

While construction was still underway, Ardelle and I showed the church to a friend of hers who is an opera singer. There was a wheelbarrow filled with construction waste and piles of lumber on the floor. So I was taken aback when the woman actually asked me permission to sing something. I think she could feel the acoustics of this room even before she could hear them. We watched as this supposedly lifeless old building drew music out of her and came alive.

The importance of beauty to our lives doesn't justify anything and everything beautiful. We will always have to be vigilant and keep awake to the danger of letting attention to the beautiful become a smug satisfaction in what we think passes for good taste. And there were a hundred compromises and adjustments made along the way to keep this project within our limited budget. These railings were all custom made for this space, but the ones around the perimeter, you might notice, are simpler and, yes, therefore, less expensive. But the two rails at the chancel steps were forged by hand by Metal Museum blacksmiths. You can feel where the top rail was hammered into shape and imagine the glowing iron being pulled from the fire and coiled like a chambered nautilus. Perhaps you can also imagine someone a hundred years from now, probably with doubts and questions, joys and sorrows, fears and hopes similar to the ones we bring here each week — perhaps you can imagine her steadying herself on the same old iron, wondering about who we were and maybe even why someone bothered to make something so utilitarian so beautiful. Maybe we're sending her the message that we put it here because we care, not only for beauty, but I hope, in a way, for her.

Friends, we live at the heart of a beautiful and hurting city called Memphis. Jesus insists that we keep alert and awake and to live as though God might walk into our lives at any moment, as God does in every moment when a stranger walks into them. What will we be up to? What should we be caught offering to God's beloved world on that day?

We know the answers. We need to be a people committed to justice and mercy, people of truth and forgiveness and grace, just as Jesus taught and lived. I also believe in my

depths that here at Calvary today, we're also called to tend to what beauty we've been given to tend, and to give away all the beauty we know how to give away, not sternly like curators who think they know what's tasteful and of value. But maybe, just maybe, like the poor shipwrecked souls we are, who have found this plank in the stormy chaos, inviting the next flailing neighbor who floats past to swim over and hang on with us to what just might, by the grace of God, save their life too.