

A Sermon by Nada Sellers, preached on 6-26-16 at First Cong. Church, Branford CT

"The Beauty of God"

Exodus 34:1-4, 29-34, Psalm 27:1,4-5 & Eph. 3:14-21

Writer Deborah Smith Douglass writes the following description about some of her early encounters with beauty as a child:

The Presbyterian church in my hometown was built in the 1960s in a self-consciously modern style. Its severe simplicity was not only the latest word in church design, but firmly in the long Calvinist tradition of prohibiting images or ornamentations of any sort...There had to be windows, though, which...were made of thick colored glass. Along the whole southeast side of the church, plain vertical panels of blue, scarlet, gold and amethyst let in the light. And the light they admitted was wonderful... [T]he transient beauty that those windows cast upon our worship remains my most loving memory of the place...As a child, bathed in those elusive rainbow shades of intangible glory, I knew a kind of mysterious, wordless blessing that was otherwise conspicuously absent from any other early experience of church.

She continues...

That early exposure to beauty in church was not just a benediction in itself – it was formative. For the rest of my life, much of what I have found meaningful in corporate prayer or personal devotion is resonant with the silent music of colored light... Ever after, I have found beauty in any form to be an opening, a kind of gateway, to God. (*Weavings*, May/June, 2003:10)

Ms. Douglass's transforming experience in the presence of beauty is probably something many of us can appreciate or even identify with. For although we may each have different ideas about what is beautiful, there is no denying that beauty is an elemental part of spiritual experience. "O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness," we sing, using the words of John Monsell, in 1863, "Bow down before him, his glory proclaim; with gold of obedience, and incense of lowliness, kneel and adore him; The Lord is his Name!" Songwriters and poets, writers, musicians and artists of every sort have sought to express themselves, using the beauty of their craft to offer the world glimpses into the nature of the Holy One.

This morning I want to invite you to reflect on the nature of beauty – how it enriches and deepens our faith, what transformational experiences it often encourages, the way in which it exposes us to creativity and insight and wonder through whatever media is involved. And most especially, I am drawn to the way beauty reveals the true nature of God. Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas has written, that rather than thinking of the good Christian life as a matter of having a sternly disciplined will, in which we learn to know the "right thing" to do, the moral life "is a way of seeing in the world...a reorientation of our vision to a more compelling object." Such a view of our world and our obligations in it, allows us to "discover beauty beyond ourselves," and orients our vision outside of our own skins, to God – that most compelling presence - and the beauty of holiness. (*Weavings*, p. 13)

Just exactly how we come to experience God's "beauty" is an important consideration... With the Psalmist we might ask to "behold the beauty of the YHWH

God, and inquire in [God's] temple." (27:4) This encounter is surely something we long for as we worship, as we sing and pray and listen and respond, participating in the wisdom of our heritage of Word and Spirit. Perhaps you are, like many others, someone for whom the natural world has a profound influence upon your experience of God's presence in life. The psalms are full of references not just to the natural world, but also to the profound effect that the natural world has on us, revealing our inner constitution, refining our vision. Rivers and forests, creatures great and small, encounters with sunsets and sunrises, trees, mountains, clouds, and the sea... All speak of the Creator's glory, all point us toward a beauty inherent in a world that draws us to knowing God more fully. Psalm 34 describes this as an experience of transfiguration: "Look to Me and be radiant, and let not your faces be ashamed." (v. 5) It's what the ancients knew better than we do, an insight into the way encounter with beauty restores and completes us... When we encounter this "radiance" we are given the chance to participate in God's own nature. Our reading from the story of Moses in Exodus describes the deeply transformative experience God's chosen leader had up on the mountain as he received the ten commandments: As God descends in a cloud, and to stand with Moses, something amazing happens to Moses' face, something he is unaware of until he comes down off this high place and the people get a look at him: his face was shining, so much so that Moses needed to veil his face so that others could bear to be in his presence. His radiant visage told the people that he had been in the presence of the Holy, and been deeply changed by it. Some would argue that in these moments from mountain top experiences to daily insight or encounter with holiness, we are allowed to participate in the divine nature: the Beauty of encounter with this Presence offers the same sorts of transfiguration and alteration that were evidenced by the skin of Moses' face. (*Ibid.* M. Ross, *Cranberries* pp. 25-27)

It is in the work of the great American theologian and philosopher Jonathan Edwards, that the fundamental idea of the beauty of God is most passionately explored. For although his most famous sermon was entitled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," the core of this amazing minister's writing and personal experience revolved around his understanding of the beauty of God:

For as God is infinitely the greatest Being, so he is allowed to be infinitely the most beautiful and excellent; and all the beauty to be found throughout the whole creation, is but the reflection of diffused beams of that Being who hath an infinite fullness of brightness and glory. (*True Virtue*, chapter 2, in *Works* 1.125 as cited at www.godisbeautiful.com/Edwards.htm)

Jonathan Edwards was born in East Windsor, CT in 1703. At the age of 14, Edwards was already a student at Yale, reading the likes of John Locke, devouring the philosophers of Western culture. Graduating from Yale with his Master's degree in 1722, Edwards was apprenticed to his grandfather, the great Congregational minister Solomon Stoddard, in the Northampton parish, and by 1729 he was its sole preacher and pastor. When he was only 17 years of age, he experienced a period of deep spiritual distress, about which he wrote that holiness was revealed to him as a "ravishing divine beauty." His heart panted, as he described it, "to lie low before God, as in the dust; that I might be nothing, and that God might be all, that I might become as a little child."

This combination of intellect and piety was to characterize his entire life and ministry: In 1734, a revival broke out in his congregation as he was preaching on justification by faith. In December there were six conversions and by spring, there were about 30 people per week. Edwards kept careful written account of these experiences and his works helped fuel the Great Awakening between 1739 and 41, in which thousands and thousands of people in Britain were moved by the preaching of the great George Whitfield who had read Edward's books and made it a point to visit with him when he came to America. Whitfield was invited to preach in the Northampton pulpit, of which Edwards wrote, "The congregation was extraordinarily melted, almost the whole assembly being in tears for a great part of the time."

One of Edwards' core understanding of the Christian faith, was that true religion is rooted in the affections, not in reason, something he defended with brilliance throughout the Great Awakening. He regarded personal conversion as critical to salvation. This reversed the policy of his grandfather, alienated his congregation and led to his ouster from his congregation in 1750, leading to a period of ministry with Native Americans in Stockbridge, where he wrote a series of amazing works, including Freedom of Will. Through his fascination and study of Newtonian physics and alongside his enlightened understanding of Scripture, he wrote that God's providence was literally the binding force of atoms – that the universe would collapse and disappear unless God sustained its existence from one moment to the next. And what was most characteristic of God's true nature?: Beauty. "Beauty is a mutual consent and agreement of different things, in form, manner, quantity and visit end or design; called by various names of regularity, order, uniformity, symmetry, proportion, and harmony..." Edward felt beauty had a specific harmony which he also called "consent:"

The reason, or at least one reason, why God has made this kind of mutual agreement of things beautiful and grateful to those intelligent beings that perceive it, probably is, that there is in it some image of the true, spiritual, original beauty, which has been spoken of; consisting in being's consent to being, or the union of spiritual beings in a mutual propensity and affection of heart... And so God has constituted the external world in analogy to the spiritual world in numberless instances...[God] makes an agreement of different things, in their form, manner, and measure to appear beautiful, because here is some image of a higher form of agreement and consent of spiritual beings.

(*True Virtue*, chapter 3, in *Works*,1.128)

This "higher form of agreement and consent" was found in God's beauty – in God's nature as a Trinity, and in love as the highest kind of beauty. Edward's own emotional and spiritual experiences often related to reflecting upon Scripture: "An inward, sweet sense of these things, at times came into my heart, and my soul was led away in pleasant views and contemplations of them. And my mind was greatly engaged to spend my time in reading and meditating on Christ, on the beauty and excellency of his person and the lovely way of salvation by free grace in him..." (*Works*, 1.xiii)

Beauty as consent and agreement... God's fullest nature and love – after God's own heart, the highest form of loveliness – as Edwards would say, characterizes the story of salvation and the ways in which we learn to know and appreciate God. Together we are called into relationship with this Holy One, and into the community called the church. As we grow in our recognition of the beautiful ways of God in our

lives and our communities, we long to be open, as one writer puts it, "to the kind of beauty that desires to be lived, not just considered, so that when we are adrift, we might be buoyed by what happens between us and the Great Mystery. So we bring our stories, our brokenness, our aloneness, our grief, our joy, our lovesickness for God, and hope for beauty to break through the mist." (K. Turner, same *Weavings*:38-39)

Paul describes this beautiful process in his letter to the Ephesians church as "Christ dwelling in your hearts, as you are being rooted and grounded in love... having the power to comprehend what is the breadth, and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ, that surpasses knowledge..." (vv17-18).

Over the summer season at our 9am worship services starting today and moving through July and August, we will be offering a series which focuses on this magnificent topic of God's beauty, not just the beauty of God's nature, but also some of the ways we experience beauty in our world. Drawing on writings about the ocean, mountains, gardens, the vineyard, the desert and more, your ministers plan to explore God's revelation and presence in our lives through creation and within a biblical context. And as I've had the chance to mention already, we will begin offering a Saturday afternoon worship service called *Journey in the Spirit*, as way to explore God's presence and power through activities which bring us together around the biblical narrative of God's love and calling to faith in Jesus. In all these ways, we pray for a season of spiritual reflection and refreshment in our midst, for the "inward, sweet sense of these things" as Jonathan Edwards described it. Come and behold the beauty of God; come and see the radiance of this Holiness. Come and bathe in the beauty that has been a gateway to deepening spiritual experience of Christian religious experience for many centuries. May this way of "seeing" become a deepening part of our vision and our devotion. Amen.

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NB: Edwards citations as found in *Christianity Today* article found at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/theologians/jonathan-edwards.html>

Also consulted:

www.godisbeautiful.com/Edwards.htm, *Weavings* as cited above and *Systematic Theology, Vol 1: Ethics* James McClendon (Abingdon, 1986) esp. chapter four on Sarah and Jonathan Edwards.