

“BEAUTIFUL. SAVIOR.”

A Sermon for Transfiguration, February 7, 2016

Text: Luke 9:28-43

Two words: Beautiful. Savior.

English Romantic poet William Wordsworth wrote in March, 1802:

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

“My heart leaps up when I behold . . . a rainbow in the sky.”

I cannot think of a better expression for what happens when we perceive something of exceptional beauty or brilliance. Our hearts *leap up*. How often have we said to one another, “Look! There’s a rainbow!” And who does not look, and hope to see it? Whose heart does not leap up?

You do not need to know the story of Noah to appreciate a beautiful rainbow. But how wonderful to think of a rainbow also as a signal of peace from God, a token of the covenant God has made with all people. For us, the rainbow is a reminder of God’s promise of peace. For once in history, it was the victor who, at the end of a great conflict, raised a white flag. That is true mercy.

I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. (Gen 9:13-15)

The story of Noah is written as a “look back.” The story-teller’s point was that we only live because God is merciful. God hung his weapon, his “bow,” in the clouds. (It doesn’t say “rainbow” in Genesis, it says bow.) God has determined, in the freedom which only belongs to God, never more to destroy the world, but to give it life.

What a beautiful message that is. How surprising, given the way people act. How unexpectedly brilliant, in a world of sin, to hear that the world has received amnesty before the fact!

“My heart leaps up.”

Peter, James, and John went with Jesus up a mountain to pray. They were in for a beautiful surprise. While Jesus was praying . . . his face was transfigured . . . his clothes became dazzling

white . . . Moses and Elijah were talking to Jesus about how Jesus would leave Israel soon, at Jerusalem.

It all added up to a vision of transcendent beauty, glory, meaning. (This is where the term “mountaintop experience” must have originated.)

Their hearts leaped up, although they had been weighed down with sleep. (Remember how they were weighed down with sleep in the Garden of Gethsemane? Similar.) Their hearts leaped up to behold in rapturous glory . . . their friend and leader.

Beautiful.

And then they went back down the mountain, and it got ugly.

There was nothing beautiful about the encounter with a crowd, and a man shouting “Teacher, I beg you to look at *my son, my only child*, who gets seized by a spirit and shrieks and convulses and foams at the mouth, and the spirit mauls him and will scarcely leave him.”

And if that were not bad enough, the man complained about Jesus’ useless disciples. They were unable to help him. Then Jesus unloaded both barrels on everybody: “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?”

Disease. Distress. Disrespect. Despair. Not pretty.

Yet **in that very situation, in the midst of troubled life**, Jesus did a great thing. Jesus saved. He rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. “And all were astounded at the greatness of God.”

Savior. (Our second word!)

Luke makes a point for us today with a powerful juxtaposition of themes: beauty and salvation. By doing so, he redirects our love of things which please us because they are excellent, brilliant, beautiful, “the best.” He directs that love of the best onto the very best thing there is: the redeeming of what is wrong in humanity, bringing life, sanity, beauty, and wholeness to people who are suffering; to the whole world.

When we think of God, Christians do not point just to things which are exactly the way they should be, to nice symmetries and colors, to normal people. We point to where God in Christ is salvaging the world; saving us from all that is wrong, bringing us back to God.

We do not build dwellings on the mountaintop so we can bask in the beauty of the transcendent. We worship God for making himself available to the poor of the earth, to people who are unhappy, to people who have got it all wrong, to outsiders, to people with pasts—for making himself available and useful to us in the form of his only Son, Jesus Christ.

Our heart leaps up when we behold Jesus pointing to a terribly disturbed human and casting out his demon, *then* healing him and giving him back to his father. We look at the salvation of the world, and our heart leaps up.

We do not say, with Wordsworth, that life would not be worth living if we could not appreciate the beauty of rainbows. We say that life is always worth living because God has given himself

to restore us to God and to one another. That is the faith we confess. The beauty in the savior. Beauty does not save. God saves, and that is beautiful. Beautiful Savior.

Hymns which speak affectionately of the beauty of nature tend to be very popular. “I walk in the garden alone, when the dew is still on the roses.” “O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder consider all the works thy hand hath made, I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder, thy power throughout the universe displayed . . .” “When through the woods and forest glades I wander, I hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees; when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur and hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze . . .” I also like “In the deep mid-winter, frosty wind made moan,” but then my ancestors saw more snow than grass.

Last Sunday we sang “Field and forest, vale and mountain, flowery meadow, flashing sea” from the hymn “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee.” (It used to say “moor and mountain,” but I guess nobody goes out on the moors anymore.) You could name other hymns: “All Creatures of Our God and King,” and so on.

Today we will sing “Beautiful Savior.” That is one of the top hymns in Papua New Guinea, probably because it is one of the very few which even allude to nature. But it’s pretty bare bones. It’s not William Wordsworth. In back-translation, it goes like this:

The garden is good, the forest is nice, and all the flowers are pretty;
But look at Jesus. He himself is very clean, and he washes you and me.

The sun is good, the moon is nice, the stars show us the way.
Jesus is better than them, his light is clean; he shows the way to people.

That text is very elementary, but it captures the essence of the hymn “Beautiful Savior”:

The meadows and woodlands are fair, even beautiful; Jesus is fairer.
The sunshine and moonlight are fair; so are the stars. Jesus is brighter.

This is one way of praising God. Take something we can see and describe, and say—God is greater even than that.

But the key, in Christian hymns, is always this. Jesus is greater not because he just looks better, but because he is the means by which God is redeeming what is sad in the world.

“My heart leaps up when I behold a rainbow in the sky.” Yes, and yes. Always has, always will—I hope, with Wordsworth.

But if my “natural piety” is always a worship of what pleases my senses, I have not yet risen to the worship of Christ.

For Christ is not all about his own glory, about “looking good.” Christ is not all about being up there on the mount of Transfiguration, face all transfigured and clothes shining with all that brilliance, in the company of Mighty Moses and the Warrior Prophet Elijah. Christ did not humor Peter, when he said he would like to stay up there forever and ever.

He came back down the mountain, and faced a crowd, and a man in the crowd who was begging him to look at *his* son, who was ruined, and save him. That is the beauty of a savior.

Jesus is not against mountain top experiences. *But he is also not about mountain top experiences.* Jesus is about bringing the beauty of God into the lives of people in the grip of the ugliness of sin and destruction. Which is why he was discussing with Moses and Elijah “the departure which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.”

Worship at Bethlehem is beautiful. I think you love that as much as I do. But what gives life to our worship, and makes it truly beautiful, is the one we worship as savior. And the life he gives us through Word and Sacrament gives us all something very beautiful to take with us to share with our world. Amen.

