

“Beautiful, beautiful light”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 27:1, 4 and Isaiah 9:1-4 and Matthew 4:12-23

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Once there was a man who was the keeper of a beautiful place. It was perched high atop a mountain. The way was difficult. People would climb for days. But when they made it, when they caught their breath and peered out over that rocky edge, they fell to their knees and wept—it was so beautiful. One day, the man decided to make it easier. He cut down the trees that stood in the way. He dynamited the rocks and paved a road. He built restaurants and hotels and shops along the way. But he was surprised to find that people began to stop coming to the top. It had lost its beauty.

He had never understood. The mountain wasn't beautiful just because it was a pretty vista. It was beautiful because it asked for every fiber of your strength to reach it; it tested you, challenged you, demanded your very best. And when you got to the top, your muscles aching, your body covered in sweat and dirt, the light shining so bright after the dark woods, the air so clear and sharp, the heavens so close you could touch, you fell to your knees because it was like grace. It asked your all, and it gave you its all. You knew the spirit of this place, and it somehow now knew you. Standing there, in the light, it was like the mountain was looking back at you, and saying, too, “How beautiful.”

The church is also a keeper of a beautiful place. And perhaps we too have not understood.

At some point in the 20th century—or maybe it's always been this way—churches began to worry about losing Christians, and so they did what the man in our story did: they made faith easier. They cleared away the demands of discipleship and rigorous inquiry. They pushed away the people who were harder to love. They stopped applying the hard questions of faith to other parts of our lives: our careers, our politics, our consumerism, our relationships and families. They stopped saying anything that might cause someone to get upset. They set up social clubs, offered entertainment, or made God an intellectual exercise.

But, maybe, in doing so, the church lost what made faith beautiful in the first place. Maybe, the church even forgot that faith was supposed to be beautiful.

When Jesus meets Peter and Andrew on the shoreline of the sea, and calls to them, “Follow me,” Matthew says that these fishermen “immediately” drop their nets and follow him. *Immediately*. Not after weighing the pros and cons, not after hearing what kind of 401(k) Jesus offers, or guaranteeing weekends off, but immediately. What could possibly cause them to do something so reckless?

Psalm 27, which we prayed today, might have an answer. The Psalmist says that he wants only one thing from God: “to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty

of the Lord, and to inquire in God's temple." From the early Hebrew poets to Greek philosophers like Plato, it has long been thought that there is in us an innate desire for beauty, which draws us to God. And by beauty, they didn't mean something superficial, which we see merely with our eyes; they meant, in the words of Wendy Farley, what "moves the spirit and awakens it." They meant that experience when you touch the truth of something and it rides your spine, it just blows you away, because for the first time, you're seeing reality as it really is. The Psalmist says that he seeks the beautiful face of God—the truth, the substance, of God.

Well, if we are to believe Matthew, that's what Peter and Andrew saw, there on that shoreline. The beautiful face of God. And as if just to confirm that this wasn't an anomaly, that Peter and Andrew aren't just some weirdos who will follow any random guy who asks, we meet two new brothers, John and James, also fishermen. Jesus calls them too. And again, we hear that they immediately follow Jesus.

What does it mean to see a light, something so beautiful, that you drop everything and follow it, as the magi followed the star or the disciples followed Jesus or the Psalmist wanted to be in God's presence always?

The prophet Isaiah says that the people who walked in darkness will see a great light. This light will give them joy. Oppression will slip from their shoulders, and they will be free. They will dance, their bellies full, as if it were the harvest.

This beautiful light, prophesied by Isaiah, poeticized by the Psalmist, and embodied by Jesus, doesn't ask just an hour on Sunday morning or an occasional prayer or a few memorized beliefs. It asks everything. "Follow me," says Jesus. Give up everything you've ever known and follow me. It's the first thing Jesus asks when he begins his ministry: walk with me, share your life with me, dwell in this beautiful, beautiful light with me.

I want "to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life," says the Psalmist.

That's what makes faith so beautiful: it awakens the truth of who we are, and asks nothing less than all of who we are.

Can you remember when you experienced that beauty, like the disciples on that shoreline peering into the face of Jesus? For me, it was in the woods, and in the poets and philosophers who perceived the sacred thread that connected nature and soul. It was also candlelight on Christmas Eve, sitting beside my family, singing "Silent Night." It was my grandmothers, and seeing people help and love each other, and preaching for the first time in church on a youth Sunday. It was discovering the God who inspired people like Martin Luther King Jr. to face down the dogs of racism and violence, for a dream. It was worship in a prison, and tears in a prison, and holding an old, paper-thin hand as I prayed beside a hospital bed.

That beauty made me want to give my life to God, just to touch that light.

By remembering that God is beautiful, we avoid the common mistake of thinking that faith—that is, our relationship with God—is composed primarily of beliefs or spiritual disciplines or

charitable actions or social justice. All these of course matter. But they do not encompass the truth of faith, which is that we are in love. Head over heels, like a teenager again, in love. We are beguiled, enticed, by the beauty of this existence and its author. To play on James: Without beauty, faith is dead. It is cold, abstract, a mere cognitive exercise or an indulgence of self-righteousness or a world-improvement agenda. Beauty is what gives faith its sense of wonder, its elasticity and resilience, its capacity for ambiguity and mystery, its desire to love and connect.

In her book *Beguiled by Beauty*, Wendy Farley writes, “When we encounter the suffering or wanton destruction of sacred, beautiful beings, our heart naturally opens in sadness, dismay, lament, compassion, protection, resistance, and healing. Beauty opens the door to the significance of beings, and having seen and recognized this, we can no longer be unmoved or indifferent.”

Or as Alice Walker says in *The Color Purple*: “I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it.”

What would have happened for that LGBTQ teen, or that recently divorced mom or dad, or that person full of doubts and arguments, or any one of us, if they had met, not a God of doctrine or judgment or social clubs, but a beautiful sacred truth that called out to them: “Follow me”? What would have happened to the church if we had let faith be the difficult, beautiful journey that it is?

Contrary to what you’ve heard, the gospel today says: Go toward the light. Walk that hard mountain path. Give it your all. Fall in love. You will see the face of God—and your own as well. And in the end, all that will be left to say is, “How beautiful.” **Amen.**