

Sermon – Second Sunday After Christmas

Scripture Texts: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84; Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a; Matthew 2:1-12
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *In a world where power fears beauty, we are invited to be transformed by beauty – especially as we gaze on the mystery of the source of all beauty coming among us.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline

1. What are the sources of beauty that orient and sustain you?
 - a. I read a book a year or two ago analyzing addiction
 - i. The author, a therapist, talked about how most of his patients have horrible routines of self-care.
 - ii. Addiction has a way of robbing us of truly enjoying life.
 - iii. Part of his treatment is pushing patients to prioritize beauty and true enjoyment
 - b. My Saturday morning:
 - i. This came to mind Saturday morning as I started out on a morning dog walk, feeling overwhelmed and stressed. It had been a busy week, and we had a funeral on Friday with a family who was deeply grieving the loss of their loved one.
 - ii. I was also feeling overwhelmed by the news of US military operations in Venezuela. Whatever your politics, the reality of past experience is that these sorts of operation by global superpowers almost always end up doing more harm than good – especially to the ordinary people who don't hold power.
 - iii. A long walk in the woods and near the river (and seeing my dog romping with joy) was profoundly good for my soul; that kind of beauty is orienting and sustaining – if God can meet me in the woods, then God can meet the people of Venezuela and the grieving family who just lost a loved one.
 - c. Beauty can orient and sustain us – but it often takes work and sacrifice for us to engage in orienting and sustaining ways! We see this to be true in today's Gospel...
2. The wise men driven by beauty and wonder
 - a. They saw a strange star – a potential occasion of beauty and wonder. But, the story could so easily have stopped there, with a mild curiosity.
 - i. Instead, the Magi studied the star and somehow determined that it was a sign of the birth of a new king.
 - ii. Perhaps they discovered some ancient prophecy; perhaps it was a dream, or an angelic visitation. The story doesn't tell us – but what matters is that they didn't stop there either.
 - iii. Instead, they set out on a long and difficult journey, at a time when international travel was no small feat. The beauty of the star oriented their lives.
 - b. Connect to T.S. Eliot's poem, *The Journey of the Magi*

- i. An imaginative chronicle of the difficulty of the journey to find the baby Jesus.
- ii. Even more, it engages with the cost of finding beauty – acknowledging that it requires a type of death. If we find beauty, we must give up power, we must give up our attempts to manage and predict and control the world around us.
- iii. We must die to ourselves, because beauty won't bow to power.

3. The threat of beauty

- a. And that is the lesson that King Herod provides in today's reading. Power is threatened by beauty – that's why so many authoritarians and dictators across history have tried to control art!
- b. Connection to the Telmarines in Prince Caspian – they grow up a wood between the kingdom and the sea, so that people might not see its beauty or remember that Aslan comes from across the sea.
- c. Herod is threatened by the rumor of a new king, a rightful king, and the text tells us that his anger and insecurity makes all of Jerusalem afraid – because power is threatened by beauty!

4. This passage offers us a choice, then, between beauty and power

- a. Beauty is a tenuous, vulnerable path at first, requiring sacrifice as we die to ourselves – but it leads ultimately to freedom and a life of meaning and value!
- b. Power, on the other hand, promises much but takes us down dark paths; it leads ultimately to the kind of horrors Herod commits – killing a whole generation of children in Bethlehem. This is the result of the abuse of power that we read about in the news, and that we see in the throes of addiction.
- c. This Christmas – and in the season of Epiphany that is coming (with its focus on the star and the light of God revealed in Jesus), we are invited to dwell in the beauty of God come among us. The good news is that Jesus comes to us not as a powerful ruler, but as one of the ordinary people who are so often oppressed and exploited. He does this so that he might provide an alternative to the destructive power of this world, so that he might grow to be the true prince of peace.
- d. My prayer is that we might pursue the beauty revealed in the Christ child, in the mercy and grace of Jesus – that we might pursue it whatever it might cost, trusting that it will ultimately orient and sustain us.

Amen.