

Psalm 27 [Acts 2:42-47]

The Beauty of the LORD

This past year I gave quite a few talks on campus to the two Christian student groups. I'm always happy to do so. The student leadership usually requests a specific topic that interests them or that they are troubled by. Hey Todd, would you speak on..... x, y, z. Which actually gives me the pulse of where students are at spiritually right now: what's troubling them, inspiring them, what they are seeking after.... In the winter term, one of the Christian clubs emailed me: Pastor Todd, would you please come and speak to our group on Beauty and God That surprised me. In nine years I've never been asked to speak on beauty. And, no, it wasn't a Valentine's Day themed talk! — they want to hear about God and beauty. But that very same week I was speaking with a student who is exploring Christianity — not a Christian, but curious about God, faith, everything. I suggest that among other things, he should check out a church service because this here (point) is where faith is best explored. Ok, he answers. "Which church in Kelowna is the most beautiful?" I didn't know what to say. He wants to seek God in a beautiful place of worship. A few weeks later a new Christian told me that started going to Eastern Orthodox church on afternoons. Why? Simply beautiful. Something's going on. Is there a hunger, a yearning for beauty awakening in younger people right now? If there is, how should the church respond?

Maybe it shouldn't surprise us if there is in fact a growing yearning for beauty among young people. They've grown up in a world that feels fabricated, artificial; the world gets viewed through devices like phones; we don't build beautiful public spaces and buildings. We're surrounded by strip malls and asphalt. Our world is treated as something to be used practically rather than beheld as beautiful. So for all those reasons maybe it shouldn't surprise us if there is a hunger for beauty among people. And I think there's an even deeper reason. We are made by God and for God and in his image. *And God is beautiful*, and the world he made is beautiful. And beauty attracts. It draws the eye to it, it lifts the heart. Beauty attracts. I remember standing in the London subway carriage some years ago and a woman — likely of Ethiopian heritage— passed through the sliding doors. She wasn't glamorous nor was dressed up to be sexy. She was simply beautiful. I noticed how every single eye in the carriage turned to look at her as she sat down. Not looking creepily. Just looking. Because beauty attracts.

We don't consider enough and often in the church that God is beautiful. And his beauty attracts. "How great is God's goodness, says the prophet Zechariah (9), "and how great his beauty!" We get a sense of that desire for God's beauty in our Scripture from this morning from Psalm 27:

One thing have I asked of the Lord,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord
and to inquire in his temple (v 4).

The Psalmist wants to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord. His heart burns for it and he wants to be surrounded by it.”That’s what it means when we read “ that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord.... That doesn’t mean he wants to spend all the days of his life in church. The reference to the Temple and later on in the Psalm to the Tent is simply to those locations in the Old Testament where God could be found in his most glorious presence as Covenant Lord and Saviour of his people. The Psalmist wants to seek and experience God’s beautiful presence and enjoy it abundantly, throughout his whole life. Everywhere.

We encounter God’s beautiful presence *everywhere* in his handiwork. A beautiful God makes beautiful things. Already in Genesis 1 we read of God creating trees that are “pleasing to the eye”. God doesn’t have to make beautiful things. But he does, and when we behold them our eyes are drawn through them to the beauty of God himself, our hearts sometimes break with longing for the eternal One. I’m sure you’ve experienced how Creation sometimes shouts of God’s beauty, sometimes whispers through our noisy and distracted hearts. What attracts you? The intricacy of a snowflake, the patterning of a tabby cat, pics of space nebulae spanning galleries, mountains. Coffee or sunrises over the Lake — we gaze upon the beauty of the LORD when we take time to wonder at his handiwork all around us. And we need to *take the time* to wonder at the beauty of the LORD. The Lord has said, “seek my face”...My heart says to you, Your face, Lord do I seek.” We have to seek and be intentional. We have to take time to pause to admire God’s handiwork, the beauty all around us, and so be drawn to the God himself. The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote:

*Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware.*

Many of us encounter God’s creation as something to be simply practically used — we pick blackberries for food, right? — but only those who are seeking God’s face will find every common bush afire with God’s beauty.

“My heart says to you, Your face, Lord, do I seek.” We see God’s beauty only not in creation but in above all— supremely — in the face of Jesus Christ. Christ is beautiful: his life, death, resurrection. Now here, even as we say this, we

come up against the fact that the Bible explicitly tells us that Jesus is not beautiful. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the Saviour who is to come centuries later to redeem God's people:

Isaiah 53: For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces...

How do we hold together that God is beautiful but his Son is not? Son should look like his Father. Well, maybe most obviously, Jesus isn't physically handsome — he's not a hunk. Sorry to disappoint you :) But he is beautiful in a deep sense. We still talk that way sometimes in describing a person: we'll say she's beautiful person even if she's not pretty. We mean there's a deep beauty in her, a loveliness of her soul. Jesus is beautiful this way. But in even more profound way, Jesus the perfect revelation of God's beauty. And here, science can help us think about what it means to say that God is beautiful. Beautiful, when he's not physical but spiritual. Really it can. track with me.

You see scientists try to measure beauty and figure out what makes people attractive. Why is, for example, that 9 people out of 10 think this face is beautiful but only 1/10 think my face is beautiful. The science behind beauty has settled on proportion and symmetry — and you can find pop examples of this all over the internet [slide]. In other words, we think this face is beautiful because of “golden ratios”, spacing of the eyes relative to the nose, breadth of forehead, turn of the mouth, shape of the nose length and width. All this together in perfect proportion and symmetry. A harmony. That's the science of beauty. And this is little like how God's beauty revealed in fullness in Jesus. For in Jesus Christ, all of God's wonderful characteristics, his traits, come together in perfect proportion. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus we see the love of God and his holiness; we see his strength and his kindness, we encounter his justice and his mercy in symmetry; in Jesus Christ God's greatness and majesty come close in humility and weakness; time and eternity are bound up together. All this, all these characteristics in symmetry and harmony — golden ratios — in Jesus Christ. And he is astonishingly beautiful.

This is why when we consider the central event of Jesus' life, his death for our sins, even in the ugliness and awfulness of the cross come shine with a beauty. Torture and death of an innocent One — not pretty at all. But there's beauty, great beauty. For God's love and justice, wrath and mercy, greatness and humility are perfectly proportioned and fully revealed in this great act of salvation at the cross.

You know we use beauty apps and AI filters on our phones to beautify pictures, particularly pictures of ourselves. With the tap of a screen on tablet or smart phone we get fuller lips, rounded eyes, dark spots disappear. Those of you with teenage daughters and granddaughters know how tempting these apps are for “Lookmaxxing”. This is a superficial beauty. Really, it’s just a dishonest prettiness that covers over our flaws and imperfections. What I love about the beauty revealed in Jesus is that it doesn’t hide any of this ugly, the sad, the broken. It doesn’t make it disappear, cover it up or smooth it over. No, it redeems it. His resurrection body is still scarred. And look again at our Psalm. [Slide] The wicked are devouring him — he’s suffering injustice; an army besieges him — danger around and fear in the air. He feels abandoned even by his parents (v.10). This is his life. But he experiences the beauty of God in God *saving* him. For in the day of trouble, he will keep me safe. (5). This is the deep and profound beauty that Scripture shows us, revealed in our Saviour God. A beauty that doesn’t avoid ugly, pretend fear doesn’t exist, or cover up our messes but one that takes all it and us into God’s saving hands; redemption in Christ and the work of the Spirit is making something beautiful out of your life, and my life.

This means that the church is beautiful. God’s people. You. The last thing I’ll say (a three point sermon). We seek our beautiful God in his handiwork in creation; the church his handiwork. Not pretty. Many of our lives are anything but and church has done ugly things. But beautiful. Scripture tells us that we are a beautiful bride in book of Revelation because the Christ is in us, through us and over us and he’s beautiful. We reflect him, the perfect beauty of the LORD. I know we don’t think about this much but we should. And I don’t just mean that we should take more care with our worship and building — our space — to reflect beauty and not just be functional and practical. We’ve neglected that too much. Even more importantly, we should dwell on how Christ’s beauty shines through us. Remember: beauty attracts. Like a beautiful woman on a train. Beauty draws the eye. And eyes are being drawn to Jesus’s beautiful bride. We saw it back in the early church. Read Acts 2. See how people are being drawn to Jesus? I know, we’ll say ‘well that was the *early* church. They were amazing.’ But today? Yes! I’m seeing it among students — an attraction to the beauty of the church.

I’ll give you just one example. At the beginning of the term UBCO had an orientation event and I was hosting the table for Spirituality and MF. And a grad student wandered by and stopped to chat, curious about what we do. And when he found out I’m a Christian campus pastor he immediately identified himself as a convinced atheist. For years he read atheist philosophy and critics of Christianity that made clear to him that belief in God is irrational and that the

church was and is awful: oppressive and hypocritical, responsible for colonialism, rife with racism; he listed off all the sins and shortcomings of the church that the university crowd loves to recite as a secular litany. BUT then he says: BUT my mind is changing mind. I still don't believe in God. But the church, he says, I've come to think that the church is maybe the best thing about Christianity. A group of people from all different walks of life coming together, asking for forgiveness, loving one another, being kind with each, reading a book that tells them life has joy and meaning. And then they go out and show kindness to people even outside their doors. He says — I kid you not — there's something **beautiful** about that. Beauty attracts! He's just described a regular congregation showing the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, kindness.... Beauty attracts.

The German philosopher Johann Georg Hamann wrote: "All the colors of this most beautiful world grow pale once you extinguish its light, the first born of creation." This is what has happened in our secular age. We abandoned God, we try to extinguish the light of the first born of creation whom Colossians tells us is Jesus Christ. And so the world grown paler, colder, uglier, meaner. But beauty attracts. Should we be surprised then if younger people I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon seek beauty in cold, pale secular world? And that in seeking beauty they are seeking the God to whom all beauty points? And should we be surprised that an atheist looks at the people of God and sees not just ugly and messed up lives of sinners but ugly, messed up lives that are becoming beautiful because in crucified and risen Lord Jesus those lives are taken into God's very life and now shine as his saints with light, colour, the beauty of HIS resurrection life.

I don't think we should be surprised at all. In Christ, *you're* beautiful — and people are going to be increasingly drawn to us.

Let's pray....