

Sacred Texts for Beloved Community 6 *Make It Beautiful*

By
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From the Pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 27

¹ The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? ² When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—my adversaries and foes— they shall stumble and fall.³ Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.⁴ One thing I asked of the Lord; this I seek: 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 his temple.

⁵ For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock. ⁶ Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord.

⁷ Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud; be gracious to me and answer me!
⁸ “Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!” Your face, Lord, do I seek. ⁹ Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off; do not forsake me, O God of my salvation! ¹⁰ If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.
¹¹ Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies. ¹² Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence. ¹³ I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.
¹⁴ Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!

Rev. 21:1-6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples,^[c] and God himself will be with them and be their God;^[d] ⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” ⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶ Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

A few weeks ago, a longtime friend of mine on study leave from her church was enjoying a road trip and spent a night with us here. Sally Campbell Evans and I started seminary together over forty years ago, and have long shared a passion for mission – both local urban ministry, particularly among the homeless, as well as the church’s global work and witness in a hurting world. She has spent these latter years serving churches in Florida, but her career includes mission work in Zaire the, now the Congo, South Africa, Nicaragua, and hurricane relief with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. I count her among my bravest pastoral colleagues unafraid to go into risky, sometimes even dangerous, places to partner in church work under dire and destitute circumstances. On this recent visit we enjoyed an evening talking, and I gave her an early morning tour of the church before she was on her way again.

That tour began in the morning light streaming through the Chapel’s stained glass, pointing out the Tiffany windows, the sculpted reredos depicting key gospel scenes behind the communion table. I told her how much I love those wood carved trumpet-playing angels that adorn the chapel with their heads bowed in reverence. We admired the Good Shepherd statue on the lawn, then entered the sanctuary where Sally threw her head back and turned in a circle to admire the beautiful architectural details, commenting on the organ’s grandeur in particular. While I described the magnificent music of our organists and choir, she took a few photographs with her phone. Then at

some point Sally said, “There is so much beauty here.” I said, “Yes, Bryn Mawr gets the importance of beauty.” She asked, rhetorically, “We need beauty now more than ever, don’t we?”

As Larry and I prepare to retire and move away, we are so grateful for the years we have spent among you in ministry and mission; and especially in worship to bask in the *splendor of holiness*, as the Psalmist describes it.¹ The sheer beauty of this place, the glorious music, the stunning art and architecture, and the church’s long commitment to the arts is no small thing. As we heard just now from Psalm 27, throughout all of scripture we are reminded to *behold the beauty of the Lord*. The beauty of coming into God’s presence with singing, into these soaring worship spaces, has the power to carry us into the transcendent realm and thereby give us the hope we need for the living of our days.

William Temple was a parish priest during the first World War, Bishop of Manchester in the 1920’s, and rose to lead the Anglican church as Archbishop of Canterbury during World War II. He was a prophetic voice during a turbulent time: to improve working conditions for labor, insisting everyone have adequate housing, access to education, and basic human freedoms. He was widely admired for his constant concern for those in need and those suffering under persecution. He was brave to stand up for

¹ Psalm 96:9.

the downtrodden at home and abroad. Temple may best be remembered today, for his iconic definition of worship. He said, “The world will be saved from political chaos and collapse by one thing only... that is worship.” Then he gave his famous definition of worship: “To quicken the conscience to the holiness of God, to feed the mind on the truth of God, to purge the imagination with the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God. When the world is finally saved,” he said, “it will be saved by worship.”

What Archbishop Temple meant by that, or course, is that worship has a transformative power. Being transported by its beauty combats our natural inclinations toward self-centeredness, it is the antidote to sin and offers a foundation for aligning ourselves with God’s holiness, truth, beauty, love and purpose. That’s what my clergy friend Sally knew intuitively after spending a career working among the homeless, those devastated by hurricanes, in global communities of violence and need, and serving the church in these fraught days of polarization and national turmoil and wars abroad. Looking admiringly around our worship spaces, saying, “We need beauty now more than ever, don’t we?”

It’s what John of Patmos also knew intuitively. The closing chapters of the Revelation to John, indeed the glorious end to the whole Bible, offer a beautiful vision to sustain the followers of Christ living in perilous times.

In 70 A.D. the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, the Temple was a pile of rubble. Many early Jewish Christians were victims of the leveling of the city. Emperor Nero killed a multitude of Christians after scapegoating them for a destructive fire in Rome. To profess one's faith in Christ became a capital crime, and popular gossip of the day described Christians as threats to the moral fabric of society. Refusing to worship Roman gods, they were deemed atheists; calling one another brother and sister in Christ, they were accused of incest. Worst of all, proclaiming the Lord's Supper as the body and blood of Christ, they were called cannibals. These were the conspiracy theories, if you will, about Christians in the early church which led to vicious persecution.

Scholar Elaine Pagels counters a common perception that the Book of Revelation is meant to be a hallucinatory prophesy, by saying it is actually a coded account of events that were happening at the time John was writing. She argues it is not the rapture event that fundamentalist Christians use to categorize people as either in God's fold or "left behind." Rather, it is essentially a political cartoon about the crisis of the Jesus movement in the late first century.² They did not need the apocalyptic beasts described in Revelation to be spelled out for them. They were living amid the wrath of evil, when John is given a beautiful vision. Revelation describes judgment

² Adam Gopnik, "The Big Reveal," The New Yorker, 2/27/12.

upon the powers of destruction and persecution: evil, hatred, division and death.

Then it describes the birth of a new creation: a new heaven and a new earth, where the destructive powers of evil will be no more, where death and mourning and crying will come to an end. Where the thirsty will drink from the river of life that flows by the throne of God. Where the Lord of light and salvation, proclaimed by the Psalmist so long before, will be the only light they need. As preaching professor David Buttrick said, “This vision must come from God because we cannot build it on our own.” However, if we cling to the vision, right here, right now, it has the power “to shape a new heart within us for loving and a new purpose for living.” that is the power of beauty. To shape a new heart for loving and a new purpose for living. That is no small ornamentation. Beauty carries the power of transformation.

I became acquainted with the work of pastor and theologian, Sam Wells, when he was the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. He now serves as Vicar of Saint-Martin-in-the-Fields on Trafalgar Square in London and as professor of Ethics at Kings College. His church has extensive outreach among the poor in central London *and* a concert almost every day. His work as a public theologian holds together the radical call of the church to a life of service with the essential beauty that empowers that call.

Sam Wells tells the story of a friend, once an outstanding educator, a jazz pianist and poet, an athletic companion with whom he climbed mountains.

But many years ago this friend developed a debilitating illness that sucked all that vitality out of him. Unable to work, now he spends his days homebound and in a fair measure of pain. Sam says, he's had the heart and soul of his former life torn out of him, and there is no upward curve. He writes that together, these old friends, have struggled to put some meaning around his experience. What truth they have found has come through his courage in the face of a debilitating illness; his honesty in reckoning with a life he did not plan for, want or need; his willingness to share both his despair and the hope he can muster.

How does he nurture that hope? When he has the energy for it, he paints. He paints the mountains he can no longer climb. Sam writes, "So this is the creed that my friend and I have pieced together from the fragments of his fragile existence: His suffering will end. And because you know it will end, you can say how bad it is right now and name your worst fears. If you can't succeed at projects, you can still invest in relationships. One day you will look back and regard this time as the defining season of your life and use it as a deep well. In the meantime, since it can't be happy, make it beautiful."³ Since it can't be happy, make it beautiful. Let me hold one image from this week side by side with today's scripture as an example of making it beautiful. The Reverend David Black, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Chicago was praying with his empty hands raised in front of the ICE facility there. He was

³ Sam Wells, *Journal for Preachers*, Advent, 2021, p. 9-13.

shot six times with pepper balls, one of them hit and exploded in his face, knocking him to the ground. A Christian, Presbyterian pastor praying, on behalf of those Christ calls us to serve, wearing a clerical collar, open faced, was shot by a laughing, masked ICE agent.

Hold that image together with this one. A new heaven and a new earth, God at home among mortals, no more tears, for death, mourning, crying and pain will be no more, the river of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God through the middle of the city. Friends, beauty is not an add-on, it is not an extra, it is not a mere break from necessity. Beauty is fundamental. It is the evidence of the inherent wholeness and goodness in creation. It is the promise of God meant for all people. In our personal lives of challenge, illness or sadness, in our city streets, and in our audacious hope for peace in the world, if it can't be happy, make it beautiful.

AMEN.