

05.15.22 Revelation 21: 1 - 6 & John 1: 1 - 5

Do you remember the name, Marshall McLuhan? He is famous for the phrase, 'The Medium is the Message', which was the title of the first chapter of his book "Understanding Media" published in 1964. His theory, now I imagine universally accepted, is that the content of the message is shaped by the manner in which the message is delivered. Content or perception of the content, which comes first - the message or how you perceive the message? By the time I was in college, his theories were all the rage, fueling the debate around the nature of reality. We asked, "Is the object real, or is the perception of the object real?" Hey, I am not going to solve this debate this morning, and I, I suspect that along the spectrum that runs from There is only hard objective reality to there is only subjective reality each one of us will find our place,

Well, despite my late night sessions debating the nature of reality, I graduated and discovered a different question with which I live today. Content or perception - there may not be a resolution to this debate - but beauty, now that is much more interesting to me now. Beauty is absolutely a function of perception. How do we say it? Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. True. Author Mark McIntosh suggests *We are drawn by desire and delight to what we 'see' as beautiful. Beauty stirs the imagination and ignites our affections.*¹ To grow in Christ means to discover in the world a beauty that is deep and fresh and vibrant. Paul writes (Gal 5:1) "For freedom Christ has set us free." Does Paul mean that we can be free of that which seeks to control or manage and flattened the beauty that seeks to inspire our hearts and minds? Is there a 'loving attention,' that is the proper focus of faith, that enables us to apprehend the beauty of God shining within the world? To see beauty is more than an act of faith. To see beauty is faith.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Jesuit priest and poet when Victoria was Queen of England, wrote a poem entitled God's Grandeur. He wrote:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining shock foil . . .

What gift of perception did Hopkins possess to look out upon the poverty and pollution and grime of Dublin, Ireland in the 1870s and see the world charged - electrified! - with God's grandeur! Who wouldn't want this same perception to see in our world, with its virus and war and lies and injustice, something of the grandeur of God? Hopkins finished his poem this way:

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent World broods with warm breast and ah! Bright wings.

John wrote of his perception, his revelation, for sisters and brothers in Christ facing persecution by Caesar, rejection by the synagogue, division brought about by false prophets and doubt sown by false teachers. He wrote what he saw - a new heaven and a new earth at peace, at rest. Even the ever shifting, ever moving sea, a symbol of chaos and instability where monsters lived, that was gone. He saw the most blessed and happy thing he could imagine - a new city of hope and excitement, a place of joy comparable to a bride adorned for her husband. There the promise of Jesus is fulfilled in the voice from the throne. There the Word made flesh full of grace and truth takes us, who are flesh and blood, and by grace offers us to God as God's own people. The Word made flesh makes it possible that we who are

¹ Beauty as an Evangelical Invitation in Secular America by M. Pasquarello, p 32 in Journal for Preachers, Vol XLV, #4)

flesh may become Word. There is such beauty in this new creation - no sin, no tears, no pain, no death, only love for one another without measure.

John saw this early on. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life and the life was the light of the world. John reached back to the beginning of time to tell us how the end of time will end. It begins with the beauty of Christ, and ends with beauty of Christ, and we are caught up in this glorious beautiful consummation by the loving grace of God.

I lean in the objective direction on this spectrum, but let me tell you about a fascinating experience I had at the Museum of Modern Art that impressed upon me the beauty is real and powerful. I am not drawn to modern art, in general, I am more of a Rembrandt kind of guy, but the museum is awesome and we wandered about on one of the days of free admittance. I entered a large gallery that exhibited a Jackson Pollock painting large enough to cover the chancel. It was massive, but the room was large and I was many feet away when I was struck by it. Pollock splashed paint in what objectively looks to be a random pattern, but I was grabbed by the painting. It was almost physical, and I can't explain it. The painting was powerful, beautiful in an unattractive way representing . . . I don't know! All I knew then was that my perception was grabbed by it. Months later, we returned to the museum to see a totally different exhibit and I went out of my way to see that painting again, and the same thing happened again.

You may be thinking to yourself, "Ok, David, that is your experience but not mine." What, then is your experience? Annie Dillard in Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek finds beauty in hundreds of orange-winged blackbirds hidden in an osage orange tree. Mother Teresa finds beauty in the slums of Calcutta serving the poorest of the poor. JFK finds the beauty of honor and duty on PT 109. Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in a prison cell and finds beauty. The centurion at the crucifixion of Jesus finds beauty: truly this man is the son of God. (Matt 27: 54)

When we pray to God, we pray to grasp the eternal truth, the sheer loveliness, of God which, in Christ, reveals this eternal truth in a new regard for others (love your enemy) or a reverence for life (do good to those who hate you), or in the courage and loving perseverance in the face of suffering and death (Behold I am with you always, even to the close of the age.)

This experience with the Pollock painting revealed that there is something more than the content of pigment splashed on a canvas in random motions - that is what I saw - that was the content. But underneath or within this content there was more. Because I had this experience many years ago, when I read in preparation for this morning that "Spiritual and moral wisdom . . . are as much a matter of love, imagination and perception as cognitive knowing and technical skill", I said "that's right!"² The world is charged with the grandeur of God! Beauty is all around us. Look for it!

² Beauty as an Evangelical Invitation in Secular America by M. Pasquarello, p 32 in Journal for Preachers, Vol XLV, #4)