

Deborah Sokolove: Come and See

A Sermon for January 16, 2005,
the second Sunday after the Epiphany
by Deborah Sokolove

Come and See

In our reading from the Gospel according to St. John the Evangelist, John the Baptizer – whom, we remember, is the son of Mary's cousin, Elizabeth – has been out in the wilderness, exhorting people to turn away from their former lives and prepare the way of the messiah, the one who would save the people from oppression and bondage. One day, he sees Jesus coming along, and recognizes him not as a near relative, but as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Now this John has known that Jesus was special since before he was born, because we are told that when Mary found out she was pregnant, she went to visit Elizabeth, who had, herself, become pregnant with John in a miraculous way. When the infant “leapt in her womb” as Mary approached, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and cried out, “Blessed are you among women...why am I so favored, that the mother of the Messiah should come to me?”

No, wait! That's Luke's version of the story. John the Evangelist does not seem to mention anything about John the Baptizer being a close relative to Jesus. In fact, John the Evangelist does not mention any of the details surrounding the birth of Jesus that we have learned from Matthew and Luke. There are no angelic announcements to Mary or Joseph, no shepherds, no Magi, no slaughter of the innocents. Like Mark, who also does not seem to care about Jesus' early life or whether he and John the Baptizer were related, John begins

with the baptism of Jesus. He starts by proclaiming that the Word – which in some way is both God and eternally in the presence of God – has become flesh and stayed for a little while among us, and by showing that this Word is the one that we have come to know as Jesus of Nazareth. However, according to John the Evangelist, John the Baptizer didn't even recognize that Jesus was the one he was looking for – or maybe didn't even know his name – until he baptized him with water and saw the Holy Spirit descend upon him like a dove.

So what are we to make of these discrepancies? Should we read these stories as absolute truth, handed down by God, harmonizing away any differences? Alternatively, should we accept the verdict of cynics, who say that since the Gospel stories do not agree with one another, and they are filled with impossible things anyway, all that we know of Jesus is untrue? Or should we heed the teaching of historians, who say that each of the Gospels was written with the concerns of a specific group in mind, and that different groups preserved different stories about Jesus according to their own, probably faulty, memories?

Judging by many sermons, courses in the School of Christian Living, and less formal conversations among us, most of us believe that while critical analysis and historical research may inform our understanding, there is also a way to read with the eyes of faith that does not require some impossible measure of perfection. Rather many of us have learned to trust that God speaks to us precisely through the incomplete, mysterious, sometimes incompatible stories of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. The messiness of the gospel stories, as we have received them, is itself a message about the gift of our own, imperfect lives that can transform us and, through us, begin to heal our broken world. As Jesus said to Andrew and another disciple of John, who asked where he was staying, "Come and see" how this might be so.

Seeing and sight are mentioned frequently throughout

scripture. In Genesis, God is said to have paused after every act of creation, and God saw that each day's work was good. The trees in the garden are not just good for food, but pleasant to the sight. Later, Jacob has a vision of a heavenly staircase, a token of God's love and care for him, despite his frequently deceptive and underhanded behavior. Joseph sees his family in a dream as sheaves of wheat, or sun, moon, and stars, foretelling his future position of importance in Egypt. The judges are said to have lived in a time without kings, when everyone did what was right in his or her own sight. The prophets speak of how our actions are good or evil in the sight of God. Moreover, in the Gospels, Jesus gives sight to those who cannot see, and – as we have heard in our reading this morning – invites those who want to know who he is to come and see. Seeing, in the Bible and in our everyday speech, is a metaphor for understanding, a way of knowing that is unmediated and instantaneous.

Yet, our seeing is conditioned by what we believe, what we remember, what we feel and what we expect to see. Most of us have looked at the classic optical illusions that alternate between two faces looking at one another and a chalice, or a lady and a rabbit; we have seen sets of parallel lines that seem to bend due to the diagonal cross-hatching that fools our eyes, or the dark dots that may appear in a closely-spaced grid; we have struggled to see the messages hidden in seemingly random, abstract images that only reveal themselves when we cross our eyes or let them relax in a particular way. Likewise, anyone who has sat on a jury knows that eyewitnesses to a crime may honestly disagree about what they saw.

Even when we can agree about what we have seen, we often disagree about its meaning. When I was new at my job as curator of the [Dadian Gallery](#), my boss suggested that I book a traveling show called "Crucifixion of the Feminine." As you can imagine, the title alone was inflammatory. The exhibition consisted of around thirty paintings, sculptures and mixed

media works by more than twenty artists, and was a tough, unflinching, sometimes wryly humorous look at the many ways that women and girls have been abused at the hands of society in general and by some individual men in particular. The most well known piece in the show was *Christa*, a large, bronze crucifix by artist Edwina Sandys that had already been at the center of controversy in New York and Richmond. Everyone who saw this piece readily agreed that it depicted a woman nailed to a cross, in a pose that was similar to innumerable depictions of Jesus at his crucifixion. Like many modern crucifixes, the body was sufficiently abstracted that one could not readily tell if it was nude or lightly clothed. The face, while recognizably human, was not that of any specific person. It was, however, perfectly clear that in this case the body of a woman had replaced the traditional male corpus hanging in agony like Jesus on the cross.

What did viewers see when they looked at this piece of art? Some saw ugliness, heresy and blasphemy. Some visitors to the exhibition called *Christa* an abomination, at once a challenge to the immutable truth that Jesus was a man and a pornographic invitation towards the further abuse of women. Others called it bad art, a cheap trick, its chunky surface masking an unwillingness to deal carefully with anatomy, its too-obvious reference to two thousand years of Christian art an unacceptable visual shorthand in service to a polemic point. Still others found in it great beauty, truth, and even comfort as they considered a vision of Christ that said that Jesus' self-giving was not about his gender, but rather his humanity. For these viewers, the *Christa*, along with the rest of the show, seemed to say that wherever women are being abused, there Christ is still being crucified. For those who recognized the truth of its proclamation, the *Christa's* very ugliness was a kind of beauty, a revelation of divine compassion.

This experiment in vision and meaning continues to inform my

thinking about the role of art in Christian worship, devotion and community life. As most of you know, I have been away from Seekers a lot lately. First Glen and I went to England for a visit with my daughter and her husband. Then, four weeks later, we went out to California, to spend time with Glen's family as well as with my other two children and their spouses. Finally, home for just a few days, I went off again to Louisville, for the annual meeting of the North American Academy of Liturgy. Those of you who travel frequently will recognize, that feeling of being a little lost, of not quite knowing what has been happening in the community, that comes from missing too many Sundays and mission group meetings in a relatively short period of time. That much travel also leaves me pretty tired; and I returned to huge piles of work and lots of catching up to do at work and home, wondering what had ever possessed me to sign up for preaching today. However, travel also gives me time to read and to think, allowing me a certain kind of perspective on our life together. One of the things that I have been thinking about is how we come to see something as beautiful.

The Bible does not actually mention beauty much at all. The infant Moses is described as beautiful, as are several women, such as Sarah and Rachel and Esther. In Joshua, there is a listing of the spoils of war that includes a beautiful robe or mantle. Several psalms call Mount Zion beautiful. The Song of Songs describes the beloved as beautiful as the hills of Jerusalem. Moreover, Romans 10:15 declares, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news! Nevertheless, nowhere in scripture is beauty defined or discussed. Indeed, Jesus seems to think that beauty is at best superficial and more likely deceptive, as he declares in Matthew 23:27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth."

Yet it does seem that humans are designed to appreciate beauty. When we experience our surroundings as beautiful, we are generally calmer, more peaceful, more willing or able to be conscious of the presence of God. Philosophers often call beauty one of the transcendental virtues, along with truth and goodness. For most people in our culture, there is undeniable beauty in a sunset, a flower, the red and gold leaves of fall, the stark outline of bare branches against the pristine whiteness of new-fallen snow, the rushing power of a waterfall, the unconscious grace of a deer at full gallop.

Other things that some would say are beautiful are more questionable. A simple trip to a home furnishings store, for instance, will reveal that what one person thinks would be a beautiful addition to their living space another person would find perfectly hideous. In my recent travels, I visited both the ancient cathedral at Canterbury and the newly completed Cathedral of Our Lady of Los Angeles. Its earliest portions dating to the seventh century, Canterbury Cathedral now stands primarily as an exemplar of the English pointed-arch style. Renovated and revised numerous times in its long history, the building retains traces of its Romanesque beginnings, and some of its many windows are figured and others clear, having been alternately installed and destroyed in accordance with changing tastes and theological understandings over fourteen hundred years. While find the building impressive in its size and ornate magnificence, and certainly feel a sense of the holiness imbued by so many centuries of prayer, I am not entirely certain that I find it beautiful.

I have similarly complex reactions to the new Roman Catholic cathedral in Los Angeles. When I first saw it under construction several years ago, my first thought was how much it looked like a prison. A large, virtually windowless, concrete structure, the building occupies most of its block, right up against the Hollywood freeway. It is equally unfriendly to pedestrians approaching it from downtown, with

massive walls and gates guarding the plaza that opens welcoming arms to those who do dare to enter. Once inside, the building does not offer an immediate view of the nave and altar, but rather draws the visitor along a wide hallway lined with as-yet-unfurnished side chapels. Finally, having traversed the entire length of the building, one rounds a corner and joins the procession of tapestry saints that marches along the sides of the nave from the open baptistery at the back to the wide chancel at the front. There is a kind of stark, understated elegance to this interior, which – like our own worship space – only comes truly to life when it is filled with the community of believers. As my friend, who went there with us, said, the Cathedral of Our Lady of Los Angeles is so open and stark that it is hard to imagine that anyone one would be drawn to it for private prayer in time of trouble. It is a fitting setting for the liturgical life of the many people who will worship there, but, again, I am not convinced that this is a beautiful building.

Clearly, my reservations about both of these great structures are more a matter of taste than of anything intrinsic to the buildings, themselves. After all, I have heard many people exclaim over the beauty of each of them. Perhaps I am too cynical, refusing to look beyond some flaws and inconsistencies for a meaning that does not depend on an impossible measure of perfection. Perhaps I am too academic, thinking too much about historical process and stylistic antecedents to allow myself to be drawn in to the mystery and wonder. Perhaps I am refusing to see the beauty in these buildings because their true nature may only be revealed through the eyes of faith – to those who, in the words of Jesus, have eyes to see. Perhaps there is a gift in the imperfection itself, which leaves a place for imperfect humans to continually bring their own gifts.

For what I do see in each of these places, and in every place where human beings strive to make beautiful, is the perfectly

imperfect beauty of those human beings. Not always, of course. As a child of this culture, I too easily fall prey to judging some people as breathtakingly lovely, and others as, well, not so pretty. Moreover, I much too frequently take stock of my own face, hair, and body, and pronounce them singularly unattractive. Nevertheless, more often, and most especially when I am willing to let go of culturally induced judgments, I am aware of the singular beauty of each of the people I love. In those moments, it is precisely their so-called imperfections, their deviations from the culturally defined norms of beauty, that intrigue me. Whether it is the wrinkled skin on one person's face, or the particular way another person stands, or the specific angle of an eyelid or a cheekbone, it is these deviations, these particularities, that define us, that differentiate us from one another, and that I, at least, find beautiful.

That beauty is the gift of your imperfect life to me, in my own imperfection. For when I can see your beauty, your truth, your goodness, then I am more able to see my own, and not beat myself up for being human. When I can forgive your imperfections, I am more able to accept the forgiveness and love that God offers to me through you. The gift we offer one another is precisely our perfectly imperfect, fully human lives, giving one another the freedom to be exactly who we really are.

You might be wondering, by now, why I have chosen to speak of buildings and beauty when there is so much war, natural disaster, poverty and just plain misery in the world. The answer, in part, is that I believe that beauty, properly understood, is the antidote to misery. Beauty is not, as some would have it, an inherent property of a thing or person. Rather, as the common saying goes, beauty really is in the eyes of the beholder. Beauty is what is seen with the eyes of love, with the eyes of God. The love of God, disbursed through us, the members of Christ's resurrected body, is what, in the

end, can heal this broken and hurting world.

As I understand our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus had been part of the crowd hanging around in the wilderness with John for some time. To John, he was probably just another follower, dusty from his travels, maybe even a little scruffy. John says, "I didn't even recognize him, but the One who sent me to baptize with water told me, "When you see the Spirit descend and rest on someone, that is the One. . . Now I have seen for myself.." That is, it was not until John began to see with the eyes of a loving God that he could see the special beauty of Jesus, the light that surrounded him and glowed through him. When we are able, at last, to perceive this light, we, too, can say, "Now I have seen for myself." Come and see.