

A Garland Instead of Ashes

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on April 3, 2022

Friendship Presbyterian Church

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness ... So God created humankind in the divine image, in the divine image God created them; male and female God created them." (Genesis 1:26-27)

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations. (Isaiah 61:1-4, NRSV)*

It was Christmas season ... a Sunday morning right after a Christmas Eve full of joy and a Christmas Day full of presents and food and family. I was 19 and home from college for the holidays. My parents always got the Sunday paper – the one stuffed with all the inserts. I had no interest in any of the ads or coupons – I had already spent all my Christmas money – but the *Parade* magazine inside did get my attention.

On the front cover was the headline for the lead article within. It was an article by the previous year's Nobel Peace Prize winner, Elie Wiesel. I had heard of him because of the Nobel Prize, but I didn't really know much about him otherwise. The article was entitled "What Really Makes Us Free." I don't know – I still don't know – what caught my attention about that, but somehow I felt compelled to read it. And so, I did.

It may have been the first line that caught me: “Does there exist a nobler inspiration than the desire to be free?” And from there, Wiesel – a survivor of the Holocaust, of the Nazi death camps – meditates on the meaning of freedom and the nature of human dignity, in the face of all those forces which would take it away. His words rang with the note of authenticity, with a power that can only come from one who has sojourned in what he called the Kingdom of Night, but who now could stand and bear witness to the power of love, the power of faith, and the steadfast determination to be and to ever remain ... *fully human*.

Our first text for this morning is from the first chapter of Genesis. It is the source of that deceptively simple idea that we human beings, all human beings, are created in the *image of God*. But what does this really mean?

The idea may seem simple enough, but its exact meaning or proper interpretation has been disputed for millennia. An *image* is a *picture*, a *representation*. Many very bright theologians and biblical scholars over the centuries have speculated as to the significance of it being said that we are created in the “image of God.” Many theories have been posited: that the image of God in us is what makes us like God and separates us from animals. Or that it is our reason, or our intellect, or the existence of a soul, or our possessing personality, or our capacity for relationship.

And yet, whatever merit each of these theories have, the likely original, intended meaning is much simpler and more concrete than these later interpretations. In the ancient cultures which surrounded the Jewish people, if you wanted to *see* a god – say, Marduk, the patron God of Babylon – you would go to Marduk’s temple in Babylon and, quite literally, look upon his image ... his statue ... right before you. To see the *image* was to *see* Marduk ... and in looking on the image rightly, one could worshipfully *experience* that which was said to have destroyed the primordial monster of Chaos and created the universe out of its body, and to have built the great city of Babylon, destined for mastery of the world.

It was into this world – a world of domination, a world in which the powerful exploited the weak, a world in which some human beings were invisible – that Jewish priests, living in the mid-6th century BC and shepherding their besieged people in the midst of the Babylonian Exile, told a different story ... a story of a Divine Mystery who could not be represented in images of stone or wood or be limited to temples made with hands, but whose image instead could be found in *every human face*. If Marduk is the god who would make human beings slaves, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – the God of the Exodus – would raise them up and set them free.

The images of the gods of Babylon now lie crumbling in the dust. But those forces, within and without, which would strip away the humanity of some have persisted. Wiesel himself bore the marks in his own flesh as witness all his adult life to his death in 2016. Tattooed into his left arm was a code, “A-7713” – given to him at Auschwitz. And yet, it was meant to be more than just an identifier. It was meant to be a new *identity*. The Nazis tried to turn that young, bright, sensitive Jewish boy into a *number*, into a *thing* rather than a person ... one whose life didn’t

matter, one who was completely expendable, one who was nothing. And sadly, to this day, such forces – sometimes obvious, but more often subtle – are still alive and well in the world.

Last week, we concluded our Hymns series by engaging with one of the great hymns of the church, “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” and its graphic depiction of Christ’s sufferings on the Cross. And discerned there a surprising hint of a different way of seeing the Cross, as something more than just a sacrifice to atone for sins, but also an act of pining, passionate love for the world – a *divine* love which would set us free to live and to be.

We’ve probably long seen the season of Lent as a season of going without – and by extension this journey towards the Cross as a journey into darkness, only to be saved by the light of Easter. But if what we did last week has any truth, then this journey to the Cross is itself a journey into the Light – a journey into a place of *open arms*, into a place of unfathomable divine love which alone can recover that image of God which is our truest self, our deepest identity.

But this is more than just about us because all around us – and sometimes *within* us – there is that which would have us deny that dignity to others. Make no mistake: These forces would have us turn a blind eye to some and fail to see them in all their God-given beauty and diversity. These forces are insidious and influence us all to some extent: The families in which we are raised, the cultures in which we live, the values we imbibe from the all too often-toxic air we breathe – all shape *what* we are *able* to see, and *whom* we are able to see.

But the Spirit will not allow our blindness, our failures, to have the final word. Amid all this, the word of the Lord comes to us as word of challenge and hope ... *and* to comes as good news to the oppressed, healing for the broken-hearted, liberty for the captives, release to the prisoners! It is an unexpected word which would have us be free to recognize and work to recover the image of God that is the birthright of *every* human being.

Several years ago, a parent volunteer and I took my church’s youth group on a mission trip to the Thornwell Home for Children in Clinton, South Carolina ... about halfway between Greenville and Columbia. The Thornwell Home was founded as a Presbyterian ministry in 1875, and today is a Christian community, offering hope and wholeness to abused, abandoned and neglected children by giving them a new home and surrounding them with people who love and care.

The youth ran a school-supply drive over the previous few months, and the donations were extremely generous! Leaving for the trip after a church service, we arrived several hours later and presented the gift. The Thornwell staff was thrilled; they could hardly wait to replenish their shelves with these needed supplies.

We spent that Sunday night in a guest cottage, and then the next morning, we helped clean and move furniture for a benefit sale in a few weeks. We all worked hard. But as much fun as the furniture-moving was, the best part was interacting with the Thornwell kids themselves. It was a little slow at first, but then our girls broke the ice with a group of elementary and middle

school-aged girls in a way that a man like me could never have conceived ... by giving them nail polish to paint their fingernails and toenails! It was like Christmas in July!

I think that was what did it: that simple act of giving that changed the rest of our time there. We were invited by the children to join them for a movie viewing in the clubhouse and then for pool time in the late afternoon. Afterwards, there was even an off-site outing to get flavored icees, with about 10 Thornwell kids in tow!

But it was sitting by the pool that late afternoon that something happened to me. Missing Lisa, a little sore from the work done earlier, thinking a little anxiously about the sermon that I would have to write ... I sat in the shade by the poolside as our group and many of Thornwell's 90 kids were having fun in the water. I looked out at those beautiful children, and I looked into their faces. I knew that so many of them had come from homes in which they had been reduced to nobodies ... unloved, uncared-for. Some had been abused, others neglected. And yet, I saw the light that lived in their eyes ... the elation in their play. And almost as if my fingers were guided to just the right place, my eyes fell upon the words of Isaiah 61 –

*... to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.*

It is not as if the scars of the pain of the past simply go away, because of a few hours at a pool. But somehow, I knew that there, in that moment, my eyes were witnessing something that I would never forget. I knew that whatever had happened before, that something else was happening now. Something powerful was at work ... something good ... something *holy*.

And I knew that these children, told by an indifferent world that they didn't matter, were slowly living into their *true* identity, their true God-given image, as chosen and precious and beloved.

And my eyes filled with tears ... tears springing from a gladness that I had not known in a long time.

And I knew, then and there, that I wanted nothing more than to be fighting for *that* side.

To the glory of God! Amen.