

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

BEAUTIFUL

(Luke 2:1-20)

Introduction: In the eye of the beholder...

Every year a contest is held - among all the beauty contests, local, state, national, and global - to find the world's ugliest dog. Perhaps you have seen some of the entries, or worse, one of the winners of these gruesome affairs.

We've been told that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. OK. To a limit, I guess that's true. But some of these puppies would be u-g-l-y in anyone's eye! (And we're not showing some of these dogs today for fear of scaring the children and sparking a rash of congregational night terrors.)

If you move from culture to culture you will find that the concept of beauty morphs. What is considered beautiful in one society will not be considered so in another. In the same culture, the concept of beauty will evolve from generation to generation.¹

So, is beauty all about taste and preference and culture? Or is there some objective standard of beauty that prompts us to be revolted by a certain dog and drawn like a magnet to a certain painting or person?

The Bible actually makes a contribution to the discussion and I made a startling discovery this week as I was researching the whole idea of beauty.

¹ My father was a man of great integrity. He refused to lie - even to tell a little "white lie." He told me once of greeting a couple in his church in Dallas who were holding the most recent addition to their family. This child truly had a face only a mother or a father could love. Dad stepped closer to the homely infant and said, diplomatically, *"Well that's some baby!"*

In looking up the word used for "beauty" in the few places where it appears in the New Testament, I recognized that the word is usually translated differently.

Normally "*καλός*" is translated "good." It means moral goodness. Something that is holy and righteous. If a person obeys God, that person is called "*καλός*."

But sometimes the word "*καλός*" is translated "beauty." I find that very interesting...

This dual translation value to the word actually gives us a bit of insight into what makes something beautiful.

If a person is living as God has designed people to live, if they are living a "good" life - God considers that person's life beautiful.

More broadly, something or someone who is operating according to manufacturer's instructions is beautiful.

A gymnast who performs a routine on the parallel bars to perfection performs "beautifully." A piece of Apple technology that downloads apps seamlessly and looks good while doing it is beautiful.

A dog that bears no resemblance to what we believe a dog should look like is ugly. A person who is not leading a life that would please God is leading an ugly life.

That which is beautiful is that which conforms to a "norm" - it is what it ought to be; it conforms to the purpose for which it was created. That which is good is beautiful.

This morning I want to think with you about beauty. And I first want to affirm that God makes beautiful things!

God Makes Beautiful Things!

When we consider beauty among the first things we may think about is the natural creation. There, God's artistic handiwork comes shining through and is on brilliant display.

The psalmist, David, writes in Psalm 19
**[1] The heavens are telling of the glory of God;
 And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.**
 - and to David's lines we say, "Amen!"

When you get away from the freeway and out into the backcountry, you are brought up close and personal with some stunningly beautiful skies.

Miles away from city lights the night sky will be lit with a billion stars or a full moon bright enough to read by. Shooting stars will astonish you as they splash by. You'll see a sunset or sunrise, a moonrise or a moonset, will keep you and your buddies spellbound. All of these are beautiful sights to behold.

In the daytime we see landscapes of forests and high alpine meadows, mountain grandeur and swift-running streams. We'll watch a herd of elk running down a mountain at breakneck speed or a hawk gliding overhead. These scenes are the essence of beauty.

And then there are beautiful people.

- There are beautiful older adults with weather-beaten faces showing the years that break into a warm smile.
- When small children laugh laughs that come from a deep reservoir of JOY that breaks your heart, that's beautiful.
- Adventurous teens and courageous young adults with conviction are beautiful.

It is undeniably true that God makes beautiful things. But God is also in the business of making things beautiful. He brings beauty out of ugly.

And this morning, for your Christmas season enjoyment, I offer up, as Exhibit A, King Manasseh of the Old Testament.

God Makes (ugly) Things Beautiful

Exhibit A - King Manasseh

A time of hopelessness under Manasseh

If you had been living in the nation of Israel in the 7th century BC, you would not have held out much hope for your nation's future. That's because Manasseh was your king. Manasseh lived an ugly life as he led the nation into ugly sin.

Manasseh's godly pedigree

Now King Manasseh came from good stock. Like all the kings of Judah, he was a direct descendant of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Judah. He was in the direct line of King David and King Solomon.

In his ancestry, too, were other good and godly kings. Preceding Manasseh were men like Asa and Jehoshaphat and Jotham who were true to the Lord. In fact, Manasseh's own father, Hezekiah, was one of the most godly of Judah's kings.

We find Hezekiah's story in 2 Kings 18 (and 2 Chronicles 28), and a piece of Hezekiah's story is germane to the story of Manasseh, so I'll tell it briefly.

After a lifetime of following the Lord, Isaiah the prophet told Hezekiah to set his household in order because he was about to die. However, rather than accept the word of the prophet, Hezekiah prayed to the Lord to spare his life, which the Lord graciously did.

We who view Hezekiah's life with perfect 20/20 hindsight wish that this godly King had just gone ahead and died because after he was healed by the Lord, Hezekiah lived fifteen more years. During those fifteen years, he fathered a son, Manasseh.

Manasseh was twelve years old when he became King and he reigned as king for fifty five years, longer than any other king who ever reigned over the southern kingdom of Judah.

The spiritual revolution Manasseh brought about would have made his godly father gag. Listen as I recount some of the atrocities Manasseh introduced to Judah.

The wicked reign of Manasseh

Specifically...

- Manasseh rebuilt the high places for the worship of false gods that his father, Hezekiah, had torn down.
- He erected an altar to the Canaanite god of immorality and violence and drunkenness, Baal, right in Solomon's Temple.
- He championed ritual prostitution as a part of pagan worship throughout the land.
- He promoted astrology and the worship of the sun, moon, and stars.
- He introduced the dark arts of witchcraft, divination, and sorcery, bringing back the wizards that Hezekiah had removed.
- He **"made his son pass through the fire"** (2 Kings 21:6) - a euphemistic way to say that he took up the practice of human sacrifice.²
- He totally ignored the prophets that God sent his way to warn him of judgment to come.³

In every way, Manasseh tried to move as far away from the heritage of godliness he had inherited from his father, Hezekiah, as he could.

We could drone on about Manasseh's wickedness, but to what end? Let's simply listen to the full summary of his reign of horror.

[2] He did evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord dispossessed before the sons of Israel...

After nearly a half century of this wickedness, God had finally had enough. Judgment fell and it fell hard. The story of Manasseh's judgment from God is found in 2 Chronicles (NOT 2 Kings), chapter 33.⁴

Manasseh is disciplined by the Lord

[2 Chronicles 33:11] Therefore the Lord brought the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria against them, and they captured Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze chains and took him to Babylon.⁵

God afflicted him. As we were reminded last Sunday, our God is a meddling God. And our meddling God directly intervened in the life of King Manasseh.

God saw to it that Assyrian soldiers - known for their cruelty and idolatry and immorality - should be the ones to afflict this king known for his cruelty and idolatry and immorality.

So, Manasseh got his just reward. But this is not at all the end of the story. God made something beautiful out of the ugliness of Manasseh's life.

The beautiful end to Manasseh's story

Manasseh's repentance

[12] When he was in distress, he entreated the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers.

² The Moabites, who worshipped the god Chemosh, sacrificed their children, as did the Ammonites, who worshipped Moloch. They would gather in front of a great furnace and work themselves into a frenzy and throw innocent children into the flames to appease hungry gods. Manasseh encouraged this practice in Judah, even offering up his own son to the fire.

³ Among these prophets was Isaiah. He had served Manasseh's father, Hezekiah, and had been a great help to him. But Manasseh dismissed Isaiah's message and that of all the other prophets, too. In fact, more than just turning a deaf ear to Isaiah, Jewish tradition says that Manasseh was the one who actually killed Isaiah (by placing him in a hollow log and sawing him in two - cf. Hebrews 11).

⁴ The books of the Kings are not interested in bringing out the fact of Manasseh's repentance, being more concerned to show why the monarchy fell. Chronicles, by contrast, was written to magnify the Davidic dynasty, and show that even a wicked king like Manasseh, when he repents, may experience God's grace.

⁵ On the Senjirli Stele of Esarhaddon, Baalu, King of Tyre, is shown lifting manacled hands in supplication to Assyria and beside him Tirhakah, king of Ethiopia, is portrayed with a hook through his lips and tied by a rope to Esarhaddon's hands.

OK. This wicked king prayed. Great. Will it matter? After a life lived as badly as Manasseh's, will God listen?

Will He say, *"Tough luck, bub, you should have prayed that prayer about 100 human sacrifices ago."*

Or, what I might think more likely, *"Good prayer, Manasseh. And yes, I'll forgive you - but enjoy the rest of your days in Assyria, 'cuz that's where you're gonna stay!"*

So, what will God do, now that Manasseh has called out to Him? You've heard of "amazing grace"? Get this!

Manasseh's restoration

[13] When he prayed to Him, He was moved by his entreaty and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God.

God listened, sure, but more than that, God ***"was moved by his entreaty."***

Moved to do what? Moved to restore him to the throne in Jerusalem!

We don't know how much time he spent in Assyria. But after some time (perhaps years?), he returned and he returned a new man. The last years of Manasseh serve as a model of what God's king should be and do.

He did away with false worship. He re-established right worship. He put in place a just society.

Manasseh's first 46 years on the throne of Judah in Jerusalem were a thorough-going perversion. The prophets called him the most wicked king Judah had ever seen. His repentance, though, was a true ugly-to-beautiful transformation.

The end of Manasseh's life was better than the beginning. Something beautiful followed the ugliness of rebellion.

And if that is "Exhibit A" we could come up with Exhibits B-Z pretty easily because God has routinely made ugly things beautiful.

Exhibits B, C, D, E, etc...

- Out of the ugliness of the destruction of the "first creation" God brought about the beauty of the rainbow. (Genesis 9)
- Out of the ugliness of Judah's shameful behavior with Tamar, God brought the beauty of the twins, Perez and Zerah. (Genesis 38)
- Out of the ugliness of the Babylonian captivity, came the Jews uncompromising commitment to never again practice idolatry.

And on and on and on we could go.

The story of God's dealings with His people from the very beginning is this: Just because something starts out ugly doesn't mean it has to end ugly. Just because something turns ugly, the story is not necessarily over. Beauty can rise out of the ashes of ugliness.

And nowhere is this message more evident than when we look at the events surrounding the birth of Jesus.

You may think that the story of the birth of Jesus is beautiful. That's just because you've been conned by Hallmark to see a sanitized version of what really happened. Ugliness is part and parcel of the real Christmas story. Consider...

Beauty Out of the Ugliest of Christmas

An Ugly Entrance for Jesus

Mary's pregnancy

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was an engaged-to-be-married teenager, promised to a man named Joseph. She received a visit from the angel Gabriel who announced that God was going to do her a favor.

The favor?

She would conceive in her womb by the Holy Spirit and would bear God's child. Talk about an ugly disruption to a carefully set plan!

Mary's reception in Nazareth

After she conceived, Mary spent the first six months of her pregnancy away from her hometown of Nazareth with her cousin, old (!) Elizabeth. Hmmm... Why would Mary leave home for six months?

This is pure speculation, I know, but isn't it likely that the reason she left Nazareth was to get away from the condemning looks and snide comments and judgmental attitudes of people who didn't quite buy the whole "virgin birth" thing?

Mary certainly would have had the comfort of knowing that she was carrying the Son of God in her womb, but she would likely also have been carrying around the pain of being ostracized from friends and family.

Caesar's census

We have all heard about the trip Joseph was forced to take from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Everyone had to go the city of their ancestors, and Joseph, being a descendant of David, had to go to the city of David. And why the forced journey? To register for a census called for by Augustus Caesar for the purpose of paying taxes. Now that's ugly!

And the implications of a census being taken of the Jews at the command of the Roman Emperor thousands of miles away should alert us to the reality that:

- God's people were a subject people;
- Palestine was a conquered land;
- Israel was squarely under the thumb of imperial Rome.

The journey to Bethlehem

The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem involved traveling over rocky terrain for about a hundred miles in the middle of winter. It is likely that Mary did, in fact, ride on the back of a donkey AND we know that she was on the verge of going into labor. How's that for ugly?

(Ladies, can any of you imagine a one hundred mile donkey ride over rough terrain while pregnant? Men, can you imagine putting your wife through that ordeal?)

The birth and birthplace of Jesus

Of course they arrived in Bethlehem and were forced to bed down for the night in a stable, because there was no room in the "inn." This may or may not have been as bad as we have sometimes made it out to be. Mary and Joseph certainly didn't expect a Red Roof Inn in Bethlehem.

But the distance between being born in a place where the only crib is an animals' feeding trough and that which would have been expected for the birth of a king is astronomical. It's ugly.

And when it came time to give birth, there was no skilled physician or midwife to help. There was no birthing room with soft lights, no music playing in the background, no attendants.

And THAT is the story of Christmas.

Everything about the birth of Jesus points to obscurity, poverty and rejection. A rather inauspicious beginning for the Son of God.

But God took the threads of that ugliness and wove them all into the most beautiful tapestry you can imagine.

Jesus' Beautiful Entrance for You and for Me

From His humble birth until His death on a Roman cross, the road God intended Jesus to walk was the road of poverty and sacrifice. Why that road? He did it for you and for me!

The apostle Paul writes [*2 Corinthians 8:9*] ***For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.***

This morning, we worship a Jesus who did not seek popularity, publicity, comfort, safety or ease.

We worship a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. He became the Son of Man that we might become the sons and daughters of God.

And now, this God who brought beauty out of the uglies of the first Christmas, is still all about making things beautiful today, even out of the uglies of our lives.

As we conclude this morning, a morning we began by thinking about Jesus' gift of HOPE, I want you to leave filled with hope for a rich future. God wants you to leave here filled with hope for a beautiful life.

First, there is the hope that you will become someone who reflects the beautiful character of Jesus.

Beauty Out of the Uglies of Our Lives

People Who Reflect the Character of Jesus (Romans 8)

[Romans 8:28] And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. [29] For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren

TRUST that God is going to use everything that comes your way to transform you into the spitting image of Jesus.

- Choose to receive the easy and delightful things as His gracious gifts to you. Let those gifts turn you into a grateful person.
- Choose to receive the hard and challenging things as well, those things that are painful, as God's tools to chip away everything that doesn't look like Jesus.

YOUR TRUST IN HIS ACTIVE WORK in your life invites His transforming power.

And then, be filled with the hope that you can become a person who manifests the fruit of the most beautiful tree in the world, the fruit of the Spirit of God!

People Who Exhibit the Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5)

[Galatians 5:22] But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, [23] gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

That is a mouth-wateringly beautiful list of strong virtues that every one of us would love to display every day to the people we know.

For grins, just look at the first one - LOVE. Most all of us want to be loved. We want to know that someone deeply cares for us. We want to know that somebody is crazy about us.

The good news is that the Holy Spirit of God can transform us - people who ARE ACTUALLY perfectly loved by God! - into people who powerfully love those around us as we have been loved.

WALK IN CONSCIENCE DEPENDENCE ON THE SPIRIT and your hope for a life marked by His beautiful fruit will be fulfilled.

Finally, leave this place today embracing the hope that your life can become powerful for Jesus.

People Who are Powerfully Transparent (2 Corinthians 3)

[2 Corinthians 3:13] and are not like Moses who used to put a veil over his face...[16] but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. [17] Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. [18] But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.

This Christmas season, let's all sign up for "Masks-Off" Relating, 101.

It's a basic level class in God's discipleship curriculum. But we never make much progress toward making impact for Him until we accept the idea that any good that comes is from Him, not us.

So stop pretending. No more faking. Forget trying to impress those around you. Masks off.

LIVE TRANSPARENTLY and the power of God will flow from you to your friends and family and co-workers and classmates.

Conclusion:

God has always been all about taking that which is ugly and making something beautiful out of it. He still is.

This year, the message of Christmas is, *“There is hope for a better ending than you would have ever dreamed. Despite what your beginning years, your middle years, your recent years have been, your story is not over.”*

God redeems ugly messes.

IF...

- He redeemed the ugly mess that was Manasseh and brought about godliness; and if
- He redeemed the uglinesses of Jesus’ birth and brought about salvation;

THEN...

- you and I can rest assured that He delights to take our messes and create something that is so stunningly beautiful that it honors Him, brings us joy, and blesses others.

This church is not a gathering of those who have arrived. We are a collection of deeply flawed men and women and young people who are being remade, restored and revived by a gracious God.

If you are a mess, there is no better place to be than this place. If you are a mess, there is no better time than now to turn to the Lord who has been redeeming messy beginnings and making beautiful endings throughout human history.