

June 17, 2017 – Father’s Day; Bow Tie Sunday
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

Anapendeza

I was in a colleague’s church recently and couldn’t help notice a very large picture of Jesus hanging in their narthex. It wasn’t the one that’s in many churches, Warner Sallman’s Head of Christ. You might know that portrait: against a brown background, a composed Jesus looks off into the distance. In this one Jesus was looking right at the viewer, but over his shoulder, backed by dramatic lighting, and his eyes were even more sparkly than Kris Bryant’s. It seemed sort of a Glamour Shot Jesus. Of course, we don’t know what Jesus looked like (though he probably didn’t have blue eyes). How Jesus might have looked has been imagined and portrayed in many different ways by many different people throughout the centuries. I posted some of these on the windows in our narthex, you can take a look after church while enjoying coffee and treats.

Personal appearance and Christian faith is on my mind because of this week’s Old Testament reading. This summer we’re progressing chronologically through stories of the kings of Israel. Last week we heard about the first king, Saul. Actually, last week we heard that Israel decided that they wanted a king, even though God warned them against it through the prophet Samuel. Now, a mere week later, Israel’s first king is already on the way out. We skipped some stories, but suffice it to say that Saul has been a grief to Israel, to Samuel, and to God.

But God is not one to wallow. God tells Samuel to take his anointing supplies and go meet the new king, who will be from the house of Jesse. So Samuel goes to Jesse and tells him to call his sons. Jesse’s got a slew of them, today’s reader only had to pronounce three of their various names, but at this point in the story Jesse called forward seven of them. They step forward, each one more attractive than the next, all these good-looking and amply proportioned young men, standing shoulder to broad shoulder, like linebackers. Except considering where this story takes place, they would be more likely be soccer players.

Samuel thinks that any one of them looks fit, but God has someone different in mind. God tells Samuel not to be taken in by appearances, it doesn’t matter how tall, dark, and handsome they are. So Samuel asks Jesse, “Are these all your sons?” And Jesse says, “Well, there’s the runt, he’s off taking care of the livestock.” So they send for him, the youngest son, in royal families the one least likely to be king. They call his name, and this kid appears. I imagine him arriving, awkward and confused, smelling of sheep. He’s still in the early phases of adolescence, all elbows and feet. There’s some fuzz on his upper lip, not enough to shave but enough to notice, and his nose and ears and eyebrows are growing at different rates than the rest of his face. Maybe he’s also experiencing a flare up of acne. The text does say he was “ruddy.”

But it has also told us that “the Lord does not see as mortals see.” The text tells us this well before the entrance of the youngest son. Even before then the scripture says “Mortals look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” “Don’t judge a book by its cover,” it might have said, except books weren’t invented yet, this was first written on scrolls.

The youngest son enters. Everything up to this point has indicated that he will be nothing to look at. Literally, not even worth looking at. So what the story says next is quite surprising. I would almost think it a contradiction to what was earlier affirmed, that God does not look on outward appearances. The youngest son enters, and, in addition to being “ruddy”—which could also mean bright with exertion, flush with fresh air, and youth—in addition to that it says he “had beautiful eyes,” and he was “handsome.” This comes as a surprise, this seems at complete odds with what was said earlier, the criteria that God uses when looking at people. A change happened, right before our eyes, a change in the appearance of this young man, when called forward by God: God sees something in him that others do not see, and it makes him beautiful.

I have seen that change happen. I'll bet you have too: the beauty that is called forth from belief in potential, the attractiveness that emerges when a heart's open book is read with tenderness, the transformation that takes place because of unconditional love. Perhaps you, too, know someone whose features are not perfectly symmetrical, perhaps they'll never be able to dunk, perhaps their curves have minds of their own, or perhaps their curves have disappeared, perhaps their faces are no longer fresh, but to you they are absolutely lovely. You would not straighten out that crooked smile. You would not erase a single laugh line. You wouldn't want to hold anything less than all that they are. You cannot picture someone more dear.

Beauty, they say, is in the eye of the beholder. This proverb is generally taken to mean that beauty cannot be judged objectively, that what one eye finds pleasing another will not. This has always seemed to me a rather mean-spirited saying, as if something is always ugly to someone. But I've been thinking about that saying differently now, in terms of this story, in terms of who does the beholding, in terms of who holds us all, and to whom we are all beholden. God beheld that youngest son, David, and he became something completely different than anyone expected. Michelangelo would later sculpt him with breathtaking, bare-naked awe. David would grow up to be the most celebrated king of Israel, and sometimes too handsome for his own good. God beheld David, and said you are beautiful. God beholds each and every one of us, and calls us beautiful. God says to us, you are beautiful to me, go out and play the beautiful game. (I had to get in one more soccer reference, the World Cup has begun.)

Being seen like that, being cheered on like that, is the inspiration for all great sport and art. That inspiration is why we have so many different kinds of religious imagery, and should have so many different kinds, even more than we do. God's delight in variety is implicit in the very first story in the Bible, the story of creation. Genesis chapter one affirms the high value God places on diversity, how very good it is. And the story becomes even more beautiful in the redemption of creation. Christ makes us a new creation, any and every one of us, no matter what we look like. As II Corinthians says, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." And as it also says, because of Christ, we no longer see others from a human point of view. Another way of putting it, resurrection changes our vision. Resurrection changes how we see others, and ourselves, and our future, and our Savior. We know longer see them from a human point of view, we see them from God's point of view, we see with eyes made beautiful by love.

We're about to sing a song about that, a song in our hymnal, from Tanzania, where my husband and I lived and worked for four years as elementary school teachers. In Kiswahili the song is called "Nimemwona Bwana," which is translated as "We have seen the Lord." Actually, literally, it means "I have seen the Lord," but I'm not going to quibble with that. "I, or we have seen the Lord!" is what the first witnesses of resurrection said on Easter. They said it with great surprise, they couldn't believe their eyes. I am going to quibble with the translation of the song's last phrase, "Anapendeza." (Finally, the explanation of the sermon title.) "Anapendeza" occurs at the end of each verse, and our hymnal translates it as "God with us Jesus Christ." As anyone who speaks of Kiswahili will tell you, that's not what anapendeza means. In Tanzania, my young students would say "Anapendeza," about me when I got a new dress, especially if it was a dress made from brightly printed African cloth, especially if the dress had great big puffed sleeves, as was highly fashionable there. If that's what I was wearing, my young students would say, "Teacher Erin anapendeza!" Or, they would say it to me directly, using their British-inflected English, "Teacher, you look smart." People wearing bow ties today, you look smart. So a better translation of the song we're about to sing, a song of resurrection, is "We have seen the Lord, and he's looking really good!" It's the East African version of Beautiful Savior. It doesn't matter that we don't know just what Jesus looked like, we know that he that he is beautiful because of what he does.