

4th Sunday after Pentecost
Sat. Peter's Church
June 16, 2024

All Things Bright and Dim

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise Him.

Many of you may have recognized the poem *Pied Beauty* written by the Victorian era Welsh poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. It's a bit complicated, so I'd like to read it again:

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Many are drawn to poetry as a sublime manifestation of beauty—something which lyrically captures a profound human experience or deep emotion. There are so many forms of art which might capture our imagination and immerse us in something we might call an experience of

perfection: an extraordinarily performed piece of music, a compelling work of art, a perfectly crafted piece of literature. We tend to find relief and a sense of peace in the embrace of anything from a created masterpiece to a walk in nature. What feels most consoling is anything which seems to approach perfection: our eye looks for symmetry and balance, we respond to favorite color palettes, our ear for something melodic and soothing. We tend to be drawn toward the familiar rather than the exotic, feel most at home with companions who seem more like us than not, and experiences that are predictable and safe.

A great irony about art is that many of the people who create great art have lived lives that have been challenged by trouble or difficulties in one form or another. Hopkins struggled through most of his life with severe depression, and most of his works were published posthumously. He never sought fame, and probably would have been uncomfortable with the attention. But Hopkins could *see* things in a way which many couldn't. Like so many poets, he was able to give expression to powerful emotions as well as great gratitude even in the midst of difficulty. In *Pied Beauty* he sees the beautiful in various assortments of things which were odd, common or unconventionally beautiful—*All things counter, original, spare, strange*. And in contemplating such an odd assortment of nature and craft, he found God.

You may have heard the phrase that perfection is often the enemy of the good, meaning that the drive towards perfection may obscure the ways in which we are called to be *good enough*. And our insistence on aesthetic perfection may prevent us from finding deeper beauty right before our eyes. The penchant for perfection may also impair our capacity to discover and inhabit the Kingdom of God.

Today's scripture gives us images of *God the horticulturist*. God pledges to take a tender sprig of the cedar and plant it to become a mighty tree. This allusion is a prediction about the future of Israel and the hope of safety, strength and prosperity. But this is also a promise of inclusion: *I will plant it in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind*.

Hmm...winged creatures of every kind. Crows as well as sparrows—bats and butterflies—maybe even ordinary flies? God also reminds us that the high shall be made low and the low high, *I will dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish*. This should remind us of many things Jesus is quoted as saying the Gospels about how the last shall be first and other apparent reversals which may not make sense to—or be appreciated by us. We also know from nature that verdant fields can quickly burn up through drought or be washed away by floods. There is a precarity in the natural order of things, reminding us of nature which is often—though not entirely—beyond our control. So too does new growth continually occur, and nature may be restored. In Mark's gospel we have scattered seeds—small seeds which once sown will become the greatest of all shrubs, putting forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade. Seeds scattered casually, somewhat randomly, even recklessly. But seeds that bear fruit.

Scripture uses many metaphors from nature to describe the manifestation of the kingdom of God. Commentators often note that these simple examples would be familiar to an agricultural people. But to simply interpret these images as “the kingdom of God starts small but will eventually get very big” seems simplistic, almost secular—sort of like a business plan or bank account. I think there is more that can be drawn from these images. To be sure, the kingdom grows in surprising and often unnoticed ways. It may seem miraculous, like the first time, as a child, you ever noticed how a seed planted in a flowerpot or dixie cup might eventually send forth a shoot of a plant. But these are also images that suggest that these things are happening *here*, not up beyond the sky. And it is happening *now*.

We might be skeptical. Perhaps because we associate the kingdom of God with a perfect, blissful place. A harmonious world where everyone gets along and nothing goes wrong. We might prefer to have *all things bright and beautiful* rather than *spare and strange*? *And why not*? What's the point of having a divine provision over us all if it's not perfect? Not *happily ever after*? But maybe this misses a great deal about what God's kingdom is really about.

Gerard Manley Hopkins would have been very familiar with the phrase "finding God in all things." This has to do with a spiritual perceptiveness which seeks the presence of the Holy even in the midst of what at first appears unpromising. Can we experience God's presence even in the face of tragedy, or misfortune, depression and desolation? I'm not talking about a simplistic act of denial or a manic defense like the scene towards the end of the Monty Python movie *The Life of Brian* with all the boys up on crosses singing: *Always look on the bright side of life!* Nor am I talking about rigid insistence that God always has a plan in spite of how abandoned we may feel. I'm talking about a habit of looking more deeply into the texture of our experience, to see what is not obvious, and to sense God's presence even when it seems that God can't do anything but sit with us in our sorrow.

I once had a spiritual director who would frequently ask me, when facing something that seemed particularly challenging, "Where is God in this?" Honestly, I sometimes found that question annoying, But the answers were often surprising, and would lead me in the direction of commitment and hope.

Our capacity to *find God in all things* is enhanced by our ability to see the kingdom of God not as perfection, but as a harmonic complexity. To see diversity homogeneity as the marker of the holy; To make space for all the winged things in the branches of the mighty tree. To find in the disappointments and reversals of our lives new pathways through the woods. This perspective is greatly enhanced by our orientation through baptism, which helps define us as a people intent on finding God. As Paul says to the Corinthians, *we walk by faith, not by sight*. That doesn't mean we are blind, but that we can see with a new dimensionality and conviction. I would respectfully amend Paul's noting that *everything old has passed away*. There's plenty of old stuff left around to trip us up, yet in Christ, everything becomes new!

Artists have a way of *seeing* which often seems different than the rest of us—but maybe not so different. God invites us to open our eyes and our imaginations to move beyond what might seem obvious or overly familiar. To take in all that is bright and beautiful along with what is less so, thus experiencing God's presence in the full symphonic catastrophe of life!

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The Rev. Dr. Joseph Schaller