Imagine a World with More Beauty

Psalm 19:1-4 (NRSVUE)

The heavens are telling the glory of God,
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
2 Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
3 There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
4 yet their voice goes out through all the earth
and their words to the end of the world.
In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,

[VIDEO]

We are imagining God's limitless love. We've imagined a World with more compassion, more community, more hope, and more justice. Today we imagine a world with more beauty. I want to establish my expertise on the topic with a story.

In July of 1963, following my sophomore year at Baylor, my cousin and I were in my car—a 1956 Ford Fairlane, two-tone green: my pride and joy. Bobby was fooling around with the cigarette lighter and dropped it—on my seat cover: burned a hole about the size of a penny. It might as well have been the size of a manhole cover!

I was working as a barber, and down the street was a White's Auto Store. So, on a coffee break I walked down to the Auto Store, and a clerk helped me pick out a set of seat covers that nearly matched the original, and I bought them. The clerk perched coquettishly on the sales counter while the manager rang up the sale and set an appointment to install my new seat covers, and we chatted. I learned she was an elementary education major at TCU, and this was a summer job.

I went back to work, but my mind stayed at Whites Auto Store. The manager of that store was one of my customers, and a few days later he came in for a haircut. I asked him about that young woman who was working at his store.

He said, "Her name is Jo Lynn Wilson. Her father is pastor at 1st Christian Church." After a silent pause, he added, "I guess that puts an end to that?"

After he left, my boss made some inappropriate remark; and there was no more conversation about her. But she was never out of my mind. I drove by 1st Christian Church to and from work every day, and so a few days later I turned into the parking lot and found her father's name on the sign and looked him up in the phone directory. Remember phone directories?

Nobody answered the phone. For two weeks nobody answered the phone. Finally, in the middle of August, Jo Lynn answered the phone. I found out she had quit her summer job and had gone on vacation with her family before going back to school. She remembered "the barber that bought a set of seat covers at Whites Auto Store, and I asked her out. Fifty-nine years later, I rest my case: I am an expert on beauty. And I'm very grateful to Bobby for that cigarette lighter hole on my seat cover.

Ten years later, Master of Divinity degree tucked under my arm, I was on the staff of a junior high church camp at Central Christian Camp near Guthrie, Oklahoma. On Thursday night, for our closing worship, we instructed all the kids to bring a towel and a flashlight and meet at the dining hall. When everyone had assembled, we led them through a wooded area and came out on the dam of a small lake. We instructed everyone to spread their towels and lie on their backs and look up into the sky. All week we had prayed for a clear night, and it was perfect. Even the moon phase was a deep crescent, so the stars were brilliant.

One of the counselors was a docent at the Kirkpatrick Planetarium in Oklahoma City, and she began to point out specific stars and constellations. She started with Sirius, the brightest star in the heavens. It's sometimes called the "Dog Star," and it's 8.7 light years away from us.

And she pointed out Betelgeuse in the Orion constellation—one of the largest stars visible to the naked eye, 700 million miles in diameter, and 425 light years from earth. And she pointed out the Big Dipper and the North Star and told how far away each star was from earth.

Finally, she pointed out a particular constellation and said, "That's Cassiopeia. One star, called alpha Cassiopeia or Shedir, is the farthest star we can see with the naked eye: 16,308 light-years away. That means the light that left Cassiopeia 16,308 years ago is what we see tonight. We literally are seeing the past. Do you know how far a light year is?

"It's the distance light travels in a year. Light travels at 186,000 miles per second. In a year it travels almost 580k miles. In 16,308 years, light travels 5.8 trillion miles. That's how far away Cassiopeia is.

She continued: "Now, think about this: with strong telescopes we can see stars and constellations and solar systems that are millions of light years away. But no matter how far we can see, with the naked eye or with telescopes, there's more. We haven't begun to touch infinity yet."

And just as our brains were starting to boil, someone read from Psalm 8:

O Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is thy name in all the earth!
Thou whose glory above the heavens is chanted
2 by the mouth of babes and infants,
thou hast founded a bulwark because of thy foes,
to still the enemy and the avenger.
3 When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,
the moon and the stars which thou hast established;
4 what is man that thou art mindful of him,
and the son of man that thou dost care for him?
5 Yet thou hast made him little less than God,
and dost crown him with glory and honor…

9 O Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is thy name in all the earth!

18 years later the Hubble Space Telescope was launched, and human vision was extended far beyond anything previously imagined. And in the past few weeks we've been amazed at the clarity of photos generated by the James Webb Telescope, which can see into space, not 16,000 light years away, but 16.8 billion light years! I didn't even bother to calculate how many miles that is!

And today's Scripture from Psalm 19 puts it in perspective:

The heavens are telling the glory of God,
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

In 2012 Jo Lynn and I flew to San Diego and were met by her sister, Barbara and her husband, Dick, who've been our traveling companions from Key West to Fairbanks, from Tijuana to Kennebunkport, Maine. We drove to Seattle, entered British Columbia at Vancouver, picked up the Alkan Highway at Dawson Creek, entered Alaska, and drove on to Fairbanks. We spent a month driving around America's 49th state. We had a spectacular view of Mt. Denali, and about three weeks in Dick summed it up in one sentence: "Everywhere you look, it's just spectacular!"

If your eye is attuned to see beauty, it's all around us: in the heavens, Grand Canyon, New England Foliage in October, white sands at Gulf Shores, sunsets at Beaver Fork Lake, or in the eyes of your child or grandchild. Everywhere you look, the spectacular beauty of creation carries a clear message of God's love.

But what about the messier places in our world and in our lives? Human ugliness cannot cover and hide the beauty of God's creation. God's beauty may be waiting to surprise us in the midst even of grief and tragedy and disaster.

How can we imagine a world with more beauty? How can we point out beauty where others can't see it? Maybe we can even be the bearers of beauty.

Mr. Rogers used to talk about his own childhood experience when there would be tragedy and disaster on TV, and he would be upset. His mother would say, "Look for the helpers."

It's been said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. If our eyes are attuned to beauty, there may not be anything more beautiful than when one human is being kind to another.

A Fred Craddock story: (p. 83-84)