



“We Are God’s Works of Art”

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Ephesians 2:1-10

“There was once a quiltmaker who kept a house in the blue misty mountains up high. Even the oldest great, great grandfather could not recall a time when she was not up there, sewing away day after day.

Here and there and wherever the sun warmed the earth, it was said she made the prettiest quilts anyone had ever seen.

The blues seemed to come from the deepest part of the ocean, the whites from the northernmost snows, the greens and purples from the abundant wildflowers, the reds, oranges, and pinks from the most wonderful sunsets.

Some said there was magic in her fingers. Some whispered that her needs and cloth were gifts of the bewitched. And still others said the quilts really fell to earth from the shoulders of passing angels.

Many people climbed her mountain, pockets bursting with gold, hoping to buy one of the wonderful quilts. But the woman would not sell them.

“I give my quilts to those who are poor or homeless,” she told all who knocked on her door. “They are not for the rich.”

On the darkest and coldest nights, the woman would make her way down the mountain to the town below. There she would wander the cobblestone streets until she came upon someone sleeping outside in the chill. She would then take a newly finished quilt from her bag, wrap it around their shivering shoulders, tuck them in tight, and tiptoe away.

Then the very next morning, with a steaming cup of blackberry tea, she would begin a new quilt.

These words are from the first few pages of a popular children’s book I have read to my children many times. With the epistle text in the Lectionary today and with the death of Kevin Sutton’s mother, Sandy, who was an artist and loved to give her crocheted creations to those in need, I found myself remembering this wonderful story. The tale continues with a king who had everything imaginable and demanded that his subjects give him even more, even if his people had very little. The only thing he did not have was one of the quiltmaker’s beautiful quilts. Although he tried every tactic to either purchase or steal a quilt, he could never obtain this coveted item. The quiltmaker told the king that the only way he would ever receive one of her quilts was to give away all that he had, because in giving to others, he would indeed find true happiness. And, in this true happiness, he would be ready to receive her special quilt. And so, the

king went away sad, because he loved his possessions very much even though they didn't really make him happy. Whatever would the king do?

We are almost to Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and Easter and we have been in Lent and the shadow of the cross for almost four weeks now. Today, more than ever I think we need to hear that we are the handiwork, the workmanship of God. Our Scripture for today reminds us that "we are God's work of art, handiwork, workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for the good works which God prepared in advance for us to do." And today, I need to believe that and I think we all need to believe that.

In Lent, we are beckoned to remember that we are works of art. We are the workmanship, the masterpieces of God. In Greek, the word for handiwork and workmanship is *poema*. We are poems, poetry of beauty and skill. If we are the poetry of God, our lives are the result of careful planning, patient shaping, and beautiful creating. We can be assured that God doesn't haphazardly slop color on a page, write a stumbling line of prose, or throw together a few bits of cloth. God has loved and lavished attention on the masterpieces of our lives since the beginning of time and we are meant to reveal and declare God's glory.

Psalm 19 says "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of God's hands." When we create something, whether with painted strokes or molded clay, or formed words, or built architecture or singing music, we experience something that must be similar to what God felt when God created this world and each one of us. God's empty canvas was a world without form, a world that was void. Each time God added a new layer of color and texture, and stood back, maybe squinted a bit, God felt a rush of satisfaction. "And God saw that it was good, it was very good."

Author Philip Yancey tells of coming across a scene of beauty just a few miles outside Anchorage, Alaska. He noticed a number of cars had pulled off the highway. Against the slate-gray sky, the water of an ocean inlet had a slight greenish cast, interrupted by small whitecaps. Soon he saw these were not whitecaps at all, but whales, silvery white beluga whales, in a pod feeding no more than fifty feet offshore. He "stood with the other onlookers for forty minutes, listening to the rhythmic motion of the sea, following the graceful, ghostly crescents of surfacing whales. The crowd was hushed, even reverent. For just that moment, nothing else - dinner reservations, the trip schedule, life back home - mattered." The spectators were confronted with a scene of quiet beauty and a majesty of scale. They felt small. This group of strangers stood together in silence until the whales moved farther out. Then, says Yancey, they climbed the bank together and got in their cars to resume their busy, ordered lives that suddenly seemed less urgent.

Ephesians speaks of the "workmanship of God." And truly God's workmanship is breathtaking. The more we know about creation, the more awe-inspiring it becomes. But there is one part of God's creation that is more spectacular than all the rest. More spectacular than the high mountains, the roaring oceans, the countless stars, or the far-reaching galaxies.

Verse ten of today's scriptures says, "For WE are God's workmanship . . ." Think about that for a moment. "We are God's workmanship . . ." No tree sings praises to God. No mountain

communes with the Almighty. No ocean bows its head and folds its hands in prayer at night. No star follows in Jesus's footsteps. And God's Son didn't die for the rocks and stones. It was for us that everything was made. "For we are God's workmanship . . ." We are the center of God's plan.

And when God created us, God stood back, maybe squinted a bit, felt a rush of satisfaction and said, "it is very good." We are the workmanship, the handiwork of God, created in Christ Jesus to do good works. I think, as we move through Lent, God beckons us to look at our own lives and consider what God is doing because we tend to forget that God is an artist and we, too, are God's workmanship and handiwork. God is making something beautiful out of us and our lives. We may not see the beauty now – we may not even see any design or evidence that God is working – but we will recognize it someday. Sure, we have our moments where we want to throw out a canvas that didn't turn out right, or rip out the stitches where we didn't sew correctly, or we say the wrong thing, or we hurt someone we love. But God's intention for us is to be much more beautiful and glorious than a sunset or a beach, an abstract painting, or a quilt. God wants us to be works of art and to treat everyone else as works of art.

Remember that our Scripture for today continues, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Here, in a tiny capsule, is the answer to the questions of not only WHO we are, but also WHY we are here: "we are God's workmanship" and we were "created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." We were created to be like Jesus and to do good works. That was God's plan all along.

My family accompanied me to San Antonio two weeks ago when I attended a leadership conference. My girls have been to San Antonio a couple of times and love the restaurants, shops, museums, and historic buildings. We ended up staying in the Crockett Hotel right across from the Alamo and my girls loved to open the windows of our hotel room every morning and see right over the walls into the famous Mission. There are many portraits of people who died at the Alamo along the inside walls of the old building. Near the main entrance is a painting of James Butler Bonham, a 19th century American soldier who died at the Battle of the Alamo. I have heard there is a similar picture of Bonham in the Capital of Austin as well. An interesting note is Bonham lived before the advent of photography so no actual picture of Bonham exists. So, beneath Bonham's portrait is the inscription, "James Butler Bonham, no picture of him exists. This portrait is of his nephew, Major James Bonham, deceased, who greatly resembled his uncle. It is placed here by the family that people may know the appearance of the man who died for freedom."

The family did not have a picture of this man they regarded as a hero. The best they could do was a picture of a family member who looked like him. The world does not have an actual photograph of Jesus Christ, except the picture they see of him in us. We are God's workmanship. We are God's works of art and we were created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Do you reflect Christ in all that you do? Are you a picture of Christ's inclusion, love, generosity, forgiveness, and patience?

It doesn't seem as if everyone lives as portraits of Christ. I and we often don't do the good works we are called to do. Krista Tippett, host of *On Being*, says, "Anger is often what pain looks like when it shows itself in public." It's true. We see a lot of anger and pain in the world. It is difficult to see the "createdness" in each other when we are slinging insults while closing our ears. It is difficult to see one another as works of art when we think we are right and everyone else is wrong. It is difficult to see that we are masterpieces of God when we care more about power and position than modesty and meekness. It is difficult to be the handiwork, workmanship of God when we fail to listen to the beautiful stories of our neighbors while locking our doors and closing off our hearts. Lent is the time when we can start over, begin again, open ourselves up, and realize that the masterpiece God is creating in us is that we would be Easter people, resurrected people.

What our world needs is more Easter people, more resurrection people. But before we can rejoice in God's joyful work in redeeming all things in glorious resurrection, we have to experience Lent. We have to deal with the worry, pain, and anger that is on our canvases. We have to live in Good Friday. We have to see Jesus confront those who excluded people in the Temple. We have to see a servant leader ride in on a donkey rather than a war horse. We have to see a friend of sinners be abandoned by his friends. We have to see broken bread and spilled wine to know that there will be a broken body and spilled blood. We have to see a savior die on a cross. Disgraced. Demeaned. Degraded. To follow the way of Jesus means to stand and face all that Lent means. Good and bad. Easy and difficult. Negative and positive. Joy and pain. Only then can we look at our lives, the works of art that they are, and be people of resurrection. Because death comes before resurrection. Friday comes before Sunday. And Lent comes before Easter. We are still being created and recreated each and every day, from the womb to the tomb, from the grave to the clouds. We are God's works of art.

Well, in the story the king did indeed give away all of his possessions and found great happiness that he had never known before. The quiltmaker, pleased with the king's transformation, gave him the quilt she had promised him.

"Thank you," replied the king. I'll take it, but only if you'll accept a gift from me. There is one last treasure I have left to give away. All these years I've saved it just for you." And from his rickety, rundown wagon the king brought out his throne.

"It's really quite comfortable, the king said. "And just the thing for long days of sewing."

From that day on the king often came to the quiltmaker's house in the clouds.

By day the quiltmaker sewed the beautiful quilts she would not sell, and at night the king took them down to the town. There he searched out the poor and downhearted, never happier than when he was giving something away.

Who are we? "We are God's works of art." Why are we here? We are "created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." May it be so, as we move closer to the cross and the resurrected Christ, the one who gave up a throne, so that we can sit in the comfort and in the grace and in the beauty of the divine. May it be so and Amen.