

## 01.28.24 – Epiphany 4

### “Finding Beauty”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

#### **Genesis 1:1-13 (NIV)**

*The Beginning*

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. <sup>2</sup> Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

<sup>3</sup> And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. <sup>4</sup> God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup> God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

<sup>6</sup> And God said, “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.” <sup>7</sup> So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. <sup>8</sup> God called the vault “sky.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

<sup>9</sup> And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so. <sup>10</sup> God called the dry ground “land,” and the gathered waters he called “seas.” And God saw that it was good.

<sup>11</sup> Then God said, “Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.” And it was so. <sup>12</sup> The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. <sup>13</sup> And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day.

**Leader: These are the Words of God for the People of God!**

All: Thanks be to God!

#### **Philippians 4:8 (The Voice)**

<sup>8</sup> Finally, brothers and sisters, fill your minds with beauty and truth. Meditate on whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is good, whatever is virtuous and praiseworthy.

**Leader: These Words of Paul Are of God.** All: Thanks be to God!

#### **Please pray with me:**

Creator God, we thank you for our worship so far this morning, the inspired music, imagery in the Scriptures and on the bulletin, and the fellowship of learning and being together. May this new topic for our year together draw us closer to you and to each other. Help us to understand its meaning and implications for our ministries and our personal lives. May this message be the beginning of an inspiring year of growth and beauty. Speak to us this morning in your Words and your voice through this servant messenger. Amen.

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Welcome back! We missed one another last week, but we took good care to be safe and smart in the icy conditions and extreme cold. I hope you were able to worship online or through TV or radio. There are many options, so let me know if you ever need suggestions. We are grateful to have Jeff Snively join us this week to share his musical skills and talent.

Beauty inspires us, centers us, and connects us as human beings; it is restorative and has the divine power to restore and heal. Think about it: beauty nourishes and feeds our souls. Have you ever been exhausted, burned out, or sad when you happened to see one of those spectacular sunsets, so pink, blue, orange, and purple that the sky took your breath away? Your mood immediately lifted seeing the glory of God our creator still at work in our world. Well, our world needs a little beauty now, with two wars, sickness, human conflict, and the political climate. Beauty is a gift of love and loveliness from God; it reflects his character and is needed for human flourishing, not just survival. So that will be our theme for 2024: Finding Beauty.

The Biblical Greek word for beauty and beautiful is kalos (καλός). It means seeking the root of moral beauty; Platonic Greek philosopher Plotinus saw that beauty could reveal the glory, power, and goodness of the spiritual world, not just the material culture. That revelation was what connected and bonded us as sentient humans. Transcendent beauty like one of those sunsets I described or standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon or at the foot of a glorious snow-capped mountain expresses and connects the world above here on earth. Beauty is found in the Hebrew Scriptures creation stories which we begin looking into today, and in the Greek Scriptures through Jesus' works of healing, generosity, and love.

The Apostle Paul uses “kalos” to describe “the new possibility of the Christian life” as well as our 2024 key verse, Philippians 4:8. Some of the places we’ll find beauty, or at least seek it as we study, will be in the natural, physical, and spiritual realms, love, justice, stillness, prayer, fellowship, serving others, suffering, the cross, Christ’s resurrection and ascension, music, the arts, sports, education, travel, faith, healing, and other areas you may imagine. One writer tells a story of his early marriage when his wife brings home an exquisite bouquet of flowers, and he loses his temper, saying they will have to eat toast for dinner, because that money could have been spent on food; they were broke art students in graduate school. She calmly replied “Dear, we have to feed our souls too.” How could they **use** the artistic gifts given to them by their creator if they were worn down by the ugliness of debt and despair? This modern renowned artist, speaker, and writer, Makoto Fujimura, is now a famous Christian leader in the International Arts Movement and is Director of Fuller Theological Seminary’s Brehm Center for Worship, because he kept his heart centered on God’s love and beauty, even in challenging times and circumstances.

We start our studies in the Bible at the earth’s beginnings with the book of Genesis, which means “in the beginning” as it actually starts out. Genesis is the first book of the Pentateuch, and the writer is either Moses, as we have thought for decades or a group of writers from various perspectives and times (the JEDP documentary theory, Jahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomic, and Priestly resources). God is shown as the ultimate creator of life itself, so all the world is under his control, including the beauty of the earth. Nature’s laws were written by him—when the sun

sets and when it rises, or when the tides ebb and flow. Not only was God existent before all creation, but so was Jesus: “<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was with God in the beginning. <sup>3</sup> Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. <sup>4</sup> In him was life, and that life was the light of all humanity (John 1:1-4).” Jesus is the giver of eternal life and helps us understand the *Imago Dei*, the Image of God, another source of beauty in humankind. We will take more time on these matters later as well as the beauty found in this redemptive God.

In our passage today, his redemptive creative power brings order out of chaos, darkness into light, and beauty out of ugliness. Not only was matter created *ex nihilo* which means out of nothing in Latin, but it was deemed by God himself to be perfect! And “God saw that it was good (vs 10b, 12c).” The time patterns on the earth were also established in these verses. On the second day, God separated the atmospheric waters from terrestrial waters by means of the sky—a beautiful arc of blue to separate the domains. On the third day, dry land and vegetation were formed. God established the seasons too. God’s voice actually spoke these things into being, demonstrating his authority, initiative, and the beauty we sang about today. We will spend only two more weeks on this primeval history, so I encourage you to explore and study the first two chapters. Some of you have notes in your Bibles or you can use any Bible dictionary or commentary available to you.

Genesis, in literature, is considered a poetic narrative used for liturgical purposes. The writer uses visual imagery and beautiful language to help the hearers make sense of the world in which they live. Let’s tie

this into our theme a bit more. Have you recently heard the popular word and concept “maker,” meaning someone who creates something new out of existing materials, like our friend JP Muller, Otto’s son, the sculptor? Or someone who paints on canvas or a carpenter who builds and is skilled with wood, special tools, or machinery; it may be a person who knits, sews, quilts, or designs landscaping. They are not frequently called craftsmen anymore, but in today’s culture are referred to as “makers.” Verse 7 states that God **made** the firmament, and the laws of nature cooperated with its maker: verse 12 states “the earth brought forth” so God did not actually “make” each tree. He made the soil and seeds, and nature did the rest. More about this to follow.

In our second passage, Paul’s letter to the Philippians, our 2024 key verse, he wrote this to allay the fears of these colonists who were really citizens of Rome. They were anxious and fearful to worship Jesus in a pagan society, so Paul encouraged them to ponder higher, more Godly and virtuous thoughts. If we do not pray and seek God’s presence, we will conform to whatever culture we live in; we will become fearful and miss the moments of divine beauty around and in us every day. True and noble are honest and respectful attitudes. Right and pure are wholesome standards of Godly character. Lovely and admirable in this context is about peace and positivity. Excellent and praiseworthy are the highest of Christian standards. “Lovely” for us will focus on a broad spectrum of beauty and being worthy of love. All of these characteristics plus many more attributes and decisions combine to bring about beauty as a virtue. Will you join me this year in Finding Beauty in all we do? Amen! || **Let us pray.**

Loving creator God, we thank you for creating this earth, sky, water, and universe. Help us to seek beauty in new and fresh ways, not just in the aesthetics, materialism, and consumerism of our culture. Please nourish our souls so that we can help others see and feel **your** presence and beauty in our lives and in their own. Let us share our insights and imagination through faith, assurance, and obedience. It is in your Son, Jesus' name we pray, **Amen.**