

An artistic interpretation

Art is part of, enhances faith journey

By the Rev. Kate Ester Johnston

Art has always been an important part of my life. I grew up begging for my own Easel at Christmas and woke up early every Saturday morning for art classes planned especially for children at the University. However, even after attending a large Presbyterian church for most of my life, it never occurred to me to combine my faith and art until seminary. In a class, with Dr. Elizabeth Caldwell, designed to do just this, I began to recognize the ways in which art could not only be part of my faith journey but could enhance it. I remember we read Madeleine L'Engle's book, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*, where she wrote, "The discipline of creation, be it to paint, compose, write, is an effort towards wholeness." I remember being intrigued by this idea at the time and yet, unsure how I might engage my creativity to lead me to something more. Up until this point, I had never been challenged to become more vulnerable in my art, being more open to being guided rather than guiding.

After many years of never even thinking of engaging my art and spirituality or seeing it engaged in my place of worship, I began a long journey of learning how to listen to the Holy Spirit in a new way and allow my creativity to be pushed, challenged, and stretched in order to hear God in fresh ways. And this journey saved my faith more than once: As I pastored a church in the midst of deep conflict, as I realized my dream to become a mother might never be fulfilled, as I grieved the loss of a deeply desired pregnancy. In these times when I couldn't hear God and wasn't sure what to say, my art helped me to hear the Holy Spirit once again. It created a bridge back to life for me, and it was in this that I truly began to understand L'Engle's words. The Spirit was helping me see in new ways, experience my faith more deeply, and work out my hurts with God through the gift of creativity.

Instead of giving something up this Lenten Season, I felt compelled to take on the discipline of creativity and share it back with the church. I set aside time every week to create something (mostly from found and re-used materials) that was inspired by the Scripture being studied in church that week. This led me to create around well-known themes for Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday and Easter but also challenged me to engage scriptures around fear, call, service, and fasting. While I created every week, I created with an awareness that the Spirit could use this art to help others think more deeply, see Scripture in a new way, engage faith differently,

and walk the Lenten journey in a more visual and emotive way. After having a new piece of art added every week of Lent, we were forced to face our own destruction visually on Good Friday as all of the art was turned over and we sat staring at the comfortable, routine, gray we had cried out for rather than the new life that Christ had to offer. It sat that way in the Sanctuary Good Friday and Holy Saturday until we entered on Easter Sunday to a visual reminder that Christ has the ability to recreate the death we often choose into the life and wholeness that God desires for us.

This didn't involve the newest curriculum out there or more committees and meetings. It did, however, require an openness to something new: An openness to considering the art, an openness to something different in the worship space for a season, an openness to hearing the Holy Spirit in a new way. I wonder how we all might engage the Holy Spirit on a deeper level with the creativity that God has placed in each one of us. If I might be able to help you think of new ways of tapping into the visual arts in your own ministry from my own experience, please let me know. I know that art allowed me to find new life in my own journey, and I wonder how it might bring something new for the church as a whole in our current contexts. I pray that engaging our creativity might help to inspire new thought, allow places of healing for our congregants and patients, and most importantly to practice creating with God so that we might be willing to let go of that which is dead and move into the places of life and wholeness that God is just waiting for us to respond to.

[The 2018 Lenten Art Series begins on the next page.]

2018 Lenten Art Series



Art Work and their inspirations from Left to Right:

Ash Wednesday Reflection, Jan Richardson's "Where the Breath Begins" Blessing

Lent I Reflection, Isaiah 58:6-11

Lent II Reflection, Mark 8:34-38

Lent III Reflection, John 2:13-16

Lent IV Reflection, Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:14

Lent V Reflection, John 12:23-26

Lent VI Palm Sunday Reflection, Mark 11:7-11

Maundy Thursday Reflection, Jan Richardson's "Blessing the Bread, the Cup"



Good Friday (Luke 23:44-46) and Holy Saturday Reflection (Jan Richardson's 'Blessing for a Broken Vessel')



Easter Reflection, John 20:1, 11-18