

*Pictures that speak*

Easter Vigil, April 20, 2019

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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You may have noticed that the sermons for both Maundy Thursday and Good Friday featured paintings and commentaries on them. Interestingly, I also have another artist in mind for tomorrow morning, Easter Day. In keeping with this theme, I'm reminded tonight of a 1970s exhibit of the works of Andrew Wyeth at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The exhibit drew record-breaking crowds for a living American painter, and the Met capitalized on the popularity by staging a high-priced black-tie gala. Andrew Wyeth himself was to be the featured speaker.

On the night of the gala, after a long and flattering introduction, the artist himself was invited to the podium. He gazed over the crowd, and then said, "*My pictures speak for themselves.*" And then he sat down. At first there was a collective gasp, and then a lengthy silence as people absorbed what he'd said, and then, finally, thunderous applause and a standing ovation.

In our passage together just now through readings from the Hebrew Scriptures, you and I have walked together through a large and dramatic exhibition. The images here convey some of the key stories of our salvation history.

In addition to the gallery we've just visited, we Christians believe that God has added a new wing. Over the past week we have spent time with many of the most significant pictures from that new wing. As Jesus entered Jerusalem, he painted a picture of the chasm between the violent and careless powers of the world, on the one hand, and what he called the kingdom of God, the realm of the spirit, the God's-eye view of things, on the other hand. We spent time at the Last Supper and foot washing. We witnessed depravity and cruelty as Jesus was tortured, hung on a cross and died. And that new wing would never have been built were it not for the final picture we will visit tonight, Christ's resurrection.

I've chosen to offer my message at this particular point in the liturgy – poised between galleries as it were – because of the baptism we are about to celebrate. Kelly is being baptized alone this evening. And that's a courageous thing for an adult to do. But, Kelly, I want to say to you that you are not alone. Many others, including those in the pews around you, have visited these galleries, returned to them often, found meaning in these pictures, found God here.

Regrettably, I discovered earlier today that our printed bulletin includes an unfortunate omission. One question is missing. It's the question that is meant, in part, to convey to Kelly that she is not alone, that we are with her. "*Will all of you who witness these vows do all in your power to support Kelly in her life in Christ?*" It's a question without which the entire meaning of baptism falls apart. The answer, "*We will,*" joins us together in the Body of Christ, reminds us of our accountability, and of the care and support we are called to show, one to another.

On a related note, I'm still haunted this evening by a moment in the Bishop's homily at the Chrism Mass at our cathedral this past Tuesday. He mentioned that in French Catholic tradition there's a notion that the first and only question we will be asked at the gate of heaven is this: "*Où sont les autres?*" *Where are the others?* With whom have you meaningfully shared in faith? Whose faith have you quickened and blessed? Whose darkness has turned to light, whose heavy weight has been lifted, because of you ~ your wisdom, your compassion, your actions?

Returning now to the present and to the pictures we've seen, I believe it would be appropriate and meaningful to say that in baptism we are choosing to make these stories our stories. As we tell them and wonder about them and retell them again they become more and more the meaning of our own lives. I suppose we could say that, at our best, at our most faithful, we not only tell and remember and make meaning of these stories but we in fact begin to paint ourselves into these pictures.

We paint ourselves into the story of creation when we recognize with awe that we are among those into whom God has breathed the miraculous breath of life. We've desperately sketched ourselves into the flood when we've been overcome by the folly and catastrophes of our broken human condition. There's that sprawling canvas that conveys our Passover from death to life when a power greater than ourselves restored us to sanity. And what about that valley of dry bones? Some of us know it well; we have our *plein air* renderings to show for it, don't we?

One plausible way to end this message may be for me to say to Kelly, as well as to anyone else here who is on the path of faith: pick up your paintbrush. Start painting. Or keep painting. And pray that your renderings will speak for themselves in ways that will show not only the wonders of God but also your part in them and your commitments to others because of them. *Amen.*