

**FINDING COSMOS IN CHAOS: THE CHURCH AS PATRON OF THE ARTS
GENESIS 9:8-17; MARK 1:9-15
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There is a scene in a Hemingway short story entitled, “A Clean Well Lighted Place,” when an old man cannot bear to leave the café even when the younger waiter wants to close and go home. The older waiter understands the old man all too well and fruitlessly explains to the younger one, “this is a clean and pleasant café. It is well lighted.”

Hemingway, an on-again, off-again Roman Catholic, suggests some of us, artists included, are like the old man in the café. We need a clean, well-lighted place to bolster us against the darkness. Hemingway attended church during the Spanish Civil War, and found enough to hold on, for a time, despite the considerable darkness of his life.¹

When we talk about the church as patron to the arts we are talking in the most basic sense of giving artists a clean, well-lighted place. A safe and welcoming port against troubling doubts and a troubled world. A place to find cosmos amid chaos. We are not talking about expending huge sums of money, but expending the right kind of welcome and embrace.

We are exploring this Lent the connection between spirituality and the arts. I want to stir our interest in this centuries old relationship. A partnership that in recent times is needed more than ever, but ironically in church and society is taken for granted if not ignored.

Hopefully, your creative juices will be stirred Wednesday evenings in our worship and conversation with resident artists and Sunday mornings when the theme is “finding cosmos in the chaos.” Finding cosmos in the chaos is how Leonard Bernstein described what the arts, especially music, did for him: enabled him to find meaning, purpose, healing for life in art. Cosmos in chaos.

If the Abrahamic faith traditions believe anything we believe that God who created the cosmos intends by the very act of creation order not disorder, purpose not chaos. Finding cosmos in chaos is easier said than done. We live in a world that teeters on destruction and violence. Yet, the creative, redeeming, transforming act of art can help us find our way.

But doesn't a church have enough to do without worrying about being a patron to the arts? We are here to feed the hungry, heal the sick, visit the lonely. Isn't art a luxury?

My late friend and classmate Ken Reichley pastor of St. Peter's Lutheran Church in New York back in the 80s faced this question. Ken was himself a playwright, St. Peter's a haven for artists and jazz musicians. When St. Peter's sold its air-rights to Citicorp and a new church was constructed under the new tower, space was included for the arts: for concerts, dramatic productions, a chapel designed by sculptress Louise Nevelson, and a triptych for the altar by William DeKooning.

The art was given to the church by donors or the artists themselves. Yet, periodically the congregation debated the wisdom of owning the art and paying insurance premiums – especially during a time in New York when homelessness was a significant problem.

I tell this story today because I suspect that if a congregation takes seriously a calling to serve as a patron to the arts it will sooner or later ask itself or be asked by others how it can justify devoting any resources to the arts in a city and world where poverty and violence define the most compelling human needs.

To address that question let me call our attention to both of this morning's scripture readings – the lectionary texts for the day.

The story of Noah and the ark reminds us that the most basic role of the church is that of refuge and shelter. When Noah prepares for the coming deluge by listening to God's call to build an ark – he was finding cosmos in the chaos.

God's wrath would sweep away generations of human exploitation and deceit, abuse and violence. So contrary to God's own vision for creation was human behavior that the Creator, like a frustrated writer crumpling a page of uninspired words and tossing it into the wastebasket, pledged holy vengeance. Yet, God refused to withdraw from God's partnership with the human family.

The ark, which the early church quickly employed as a symbol for itself, is the place where God's dream for creation is housed and protected in the very creatures on board. But the ark also houses the promise, which we hear about today, to keep the partnership, the covenant with God alive so that God's dream can come true. Ark of the covenant.

If the story of Noah and the ark describes the basic mission of the church, the story of Jesus' baptism and wilderness experience describes the basic mission of the believer namely: to discern our calling among conflicting voices and seductive opportunities.

Did you notice immediately after Jesus is baptized and proclaimed God's beloved son the Spirit drives him into the wilderness? Mark gives us the impression of cause and effect. One leads to the other. Perhaps Jesus could have hung out back at the pool hall in Nazareth or the mall in Capernaum, but listening to the call of the Spirit takes him into the thick of searching his life's purpose in a world, as the devil reminds him, of profound suffering and need. Cosmos in chaos.

We talked last month about truth over harmony. We said that the truth will make you free but first it will make you miserable. Facing the truth of yourself, the truth of the world, the truth of God is what the wilderness is about. Whether Jesus actually went into a literal wilderness doesn't really matter. The point is he journeyed deeper into his heart.

So how do these stories help answer the question, can the church devote precious resources and serve as patron to the arts in a world of profound suffering and human need?

My thesis today is this: artists are the theologians of our time and art is a language of faith that speaks compellingly not just to believers but to non-believers as well.

Robert Wuthnow says that poets, painters and film-makers are the ones raising questions and seeking answers about the meaning of life. The church, therefore, is called, like Noah, to provide a clean, well-lighted space to those who carry a holy vision for the human family and speak to us from their personal wildernesses and the wilderness of society.¹¹

There is an important distinction to make here: when I am talking about art I mean a wide range of forms. Everything from the whimsical bicycle one of our sons made out of paper mache in a week long art class at the Chautauqua Institution when he was a grade schooler, to the wonderful choral works we are hearing today thanks to the Heidelberg College Choir, to the Margaret Martin paintings hanging in our receptionist room.

What I don't mean is that art must be in some obvious way "Christian." "Art is art," says Madeleine L'Engle, "painting is painting, music is music, a story is a story. If it's bad art, it's bad religion....To talk about art and faith," she says, "is for me one and the same thing. It is to share the meaning of my life, what gives life its tragedy and its glory."ⁱⁱⁱ

What we are saying today is that art, like religion, awakens something in us. A recognition of truth. A hunger for wholeness. A resolve to commit to higher principles and ideals, a nobler vision for living.

What would it mean for a church to be a patron to the arts? Webster defines patron as "defender, advocate and friend." Providing a clean, well-lighted place is only a start. It may have been enough for Hemingway for a short time but frankly there are a lot of starving artists out there who long to be engaged in dialogue about what they do and what motivates their work.

Being a patron to the arts requires as much from the patron as for the artist. It requires entering a relationship which, for our part, would demonstrate the willingness to think and grow and dialogue with artists and their work. I love baroque music. But I have to work to understand current forms of music from underground hip-hop my son likes to the latest composition by Mark Ingebreetsen.

Such a willingness to embrace artists and their work implies that we will change in the process. Not unlike seeking in our religiously diverse society a deeper understanding of other faith traditions – the days of not getting to know each other are over, says Christian pluralist Diana Eck – so seeking deeper understanding of the arts will change our world view, get us out of our little Presbyterian box, widen our horizons, challenge narrow perspectives.

A few weeks ago Carol and Ian and I visited the Burchfield-Penney Art Museum to hear MacArthur Award winner David Isay of National Public Radio's Sound Portraits fame. Mr. Isay is a documentary artist in the tradition of Milton Rogovin whose photography of poor working class people is now on display at the museum.

Of several sound portraits Mr. Isay played, one was of two thirteen year old boys who live in the Ida B. Wells projects in Chicago. Mr. Isay gave each boy a tape recorder and said, "your assignment is to use these tape recorders to tell us what it is like to be you, here in the projects."

The result was an remarkably eloquent, ingenious, resilient sound portrait of the boys' world. Interviewing pimps, addicts, grandparents, older siblings, Vietnam Veterans, telling their own stories the boys brought back a picture of modern urban life that was moving, heart-rending, even hopeful. Being a patron of the arts can be as simple as giving two kids tape recorders and saying tell me what it's like to be you. Then listening.

Or being a patron of the arts could be something along the lines of St. Peter's reaching out to the jazz community in New York City or Fourth Presbyterian in Chicago holding an annual two week autumn arts festival.

But whatever it means it has to mean something, make some difference in the hearts of the members of the patron community.

You get the feeling talking with David Isay or visiting St. Peter's or Fourth Presbyterian of a passionate vitality at the core of their spirit. The courage to face the darkness as well as the light. The resolve to somehow do their part to make the world more just.

We are certainly doing more than a little here at Westminster to keep the arts alive and well in Buffalo. Witness these three weeks of outstanding choral music capped off by our own choir's presentation of Haydn's magnificent "Creation."

But my goal today is to raise the bar, to envision Westminster as a sort of funky, classy 21st century salon of artists and their ideas. I am not sure exactly what that would look like. But it would mean – at a deeper, corporate level – opening ourselves to the message and ministry of the arts, learning its language of creativity and sharing its search for truth. Even if we have to struggle to do it.

It is annual meeting Sunday – a good time to consider lofty visions and new frontiers. Our nation may be at war by the end of the week. We'll need truth seekers and truth sayers in our midst to help us find our way in the fog of conflict and war. I can't think of a better time to invite deeper commitment to the arts than right now. Amen.

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ⁱ Alfred Kazin, God and the American Writer (New York: Vintage Books, 1997) 20.

ⁱⁱ Robert Wuthnow, Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) this work is the result of research done at the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton University. The book was the catalyst for Westminster's spirituality and arts program this lent.

ⁱⁱⁱ Madeleine L'Engle, Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980) 16.