

## BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

*13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' <sup>14</sup>And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' <sup>15</sup>He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' <sup>16</sup>Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' <sup>17</sup>And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup>And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup>I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' <sup>20</sup>Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.*

*69 Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, 'You also were with Jesus the Galilean.' <sup>70</sup>But he denied it before all of them, saying, 'I do not know what you are talking about.' <sup>71</sup>When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, 'This man was with Jesus of Nazareth. <sup>72</sup>Again he denied it with an oath, 'I do not know the man.' <sup>73</sup>After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, 'Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.' <sup>74</sup>Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, 'I do not know the man!' At that moment the cock crowed. <sup>75</sup>Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: 'Before the*

*cock crows, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly.*

(Matthew 16:13-20, 26:69-75, NRSV)

God created for 6 days and on the 7th day God rested. But what did God do on the 8th day? What is God doing today? Does God continue to rest or does God remain involved? Is creation finished or rather ongoing? Unlike the Deists who believe that God set the world in motion and then stepped back, I believe that God's creative power is still at work in our world and in each of our lives. Theologian Paul Tillich once wrote, "Here and there in the world and now and then in ourselves is a New Creation" (*The New Being*). This New Creation is God's work, though we have our part to play. God's transforming work in our world and in our lives changes us from the beastly to the beautiful, from incomplete to fully human.

We all have both sides—a beautiful side and a beastly one. The history of humankind shows the battle that rages within us all. On a societal level, Germany gave us the music of Beethoven and Bach, but also gave us the likes of Hitler and Mengela. Italy gave us the Renaissance, but also Mussolini. Our own country gave the world the first modern democracy, but we also tolerated slavery for years, annihilated the civilizations created by Native Americans, and even interred many Japanese living in our midst while fighting for freedom abroad. Point to any nation on the globe and you'll see the same story repeating itself, nations capable of producing both beauty and beasts.

Within each person, as well as within each nation, we see this same capacity. Vincent Van Gogh comes to mind. Van Gogh's passion led him from being a minister to society's impoverished masses to becoming an ingenious painter who, unfortunately, sold only one painting in his lifetime. Juxtaposed against the beauty he created, Van Gogh battled depression. And despite his marvelous talent, his passions got the best of him.

The beast within devoured the beauty as Van Gogh put a gun to his chest. The same hand that brilliantly painted life's swirling sunflowers and stars brought his own life to an end.

John Newton, the composer of "Amazing Grace," knew the beautiful and the beastly as well when he wrote of the amazing grace "that saved a wretch like me." "Wretch" may seem like a harsh word until we realize that John Newton had been the captain of a slave ship. His beastly side allowed him to carry a cargo of human beings. It was after he became a Christian that John Newton wrote of God's "amazing grace" which transformed him from a slave trader to something more beautiful, someone more fully human. In John Newton we see the beginning of a New Creation.

For most of us the extremes are not as great as those experienced by Van Gogh or John Newton, but we too know about our own internal beauty and beast. We all have our moments of greatness when everything comes together and for an instant we sense that our lives are full of meaning, joy, fulfillment, and ecstasy. The beauty of the world and our sacred place in it harmonize to create celestial delight.

Such moments of beauty happen to each of us. Sometimes it is a big event like when our child learns to walk or when we fall in love. At other times it is the little things like seeing a butterfly or being moved by a powerful novel or piece of music. These events have the power to deepen our faith, to nudge us a little from beast to beauty, to continue God's New Creation within us.

I remember the summer of 1989 when I lived in Washington, D.C., and interned with Bread for the World, an organization that lobbies Congress on behalf of hungry persons. Daily I dealt with the ugliness of world hunger. One hot July Saturday I hiked part of the Appalachian Trail in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. The day didn't start out too pleasant with the

morning temperature reaching well into the 90's, but when we reached our destination, McAfee Knob, I had a bird's eye view of the surrounding valley. A hawk was soaring below us. I stared in awe at the massive boulders and the tiny wildflowers, the huddled trees and the expansive sky. For a few moments I felt my own spirit soar like the hawk. I was dazzled by the splendor and felt that, if only for a moment, all was right with the world, at least my little corner of it. I marveled at the world's beauty, a beauty so intense that it seemed to negate the cruelty our world daily dishes out. While we can't naively deny our world's problems, we can open our hearts to the world's beauty.

We have other moments too though. Those times when we struggle with whatever it is that keeps us from living life to the fullest. Anxiety, rage, addiction, greed, low self-esteem: all of these beasts and countless others are lived out in ways that harm our loved ones and ourselves.

One of my close friends has wrestled for many years with his beast, depression. Finally, he became suicidal and checked himself into a hospital. After he got out of the hospital, his recovery took psychotherapy, medication, and the prayerful support of his family and friends. Some eighteen years later, my friend has a good job and is psychologically healthy. He knows that the beast could return, so he lives with his eyes open. However, having coped with depression before, there is every reason to believe that he will continue to do so. The beauty of a happy life is his because he faced his beast head on. With God's help, the New Creation continues to grow in my friend's life.

You and I are not unique in these battles. Even the heroes of the Christian faith recognized this conflict. The life of the Apostle Peter demonstrates well a propensity for sinning and sainthood, beauty and beastliness. Peter, the only disciple with enough faith or impetuosity to hop out on the water and walk with Jesus, was also the one to whom Jesus said, "Get thee behind me Satan" because Peter's suggestion was so out of line.

This morning's texts give us further insight into Peter's psyche. In the first, Jesus questions the disciples to see what the masses were saying about him. The disciples give answers equating Jesus with prophets like Elijah, Jeremiah, or John the Baptist. Jesus tries to get below the surface and asks them point blank, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter perceptively answers, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus smiles to himself that finally someone has gotten it, but realizes that these words did not come from Peter alone. No. These words were spiritually inspired and Peter was open enough to receive the message. Jesus brags on Peter and gives him the nickname Rock because of the disciple's solid faith. The New Creation was beginning to sprout in Peter.

In the second passage, we see the lowest point of Peter's life. On the night that he was betrayed, Jesus predicted that all of the disciples would scatter before his crucifixion. In his typical brash style, Peter brags that while others might fall away, he would never forsake Christ. Jesus says much to the contrary, that Peter would deny him three times before the rooster crowed at the break of day. As Jesus prophesied, Peter vehemently denied three times even knowing Christ while Jesus was inside being questioned and beaten. When Peter heard the rooster crow he left and wept bitterly. How can we account for this? How can someone who was at one point in his life full of faith confessing Christ change so quickly and deny Christ? How did this one called Rock crumble as if he were a sand castle being washed away in a sea of doubt and fear?

Was Jesus wrong when he called Peter rock? No. Even though Peter denied him, Jesus looked beyond this to see the person who Peter would become. Jesus glimpsed the New Creation in Peter and saw a faithful disciple who would one day die a martyr's death on an upside down cross.

It is much like the story of "Beauty and the Beast." The

Prince was always hidden within the Beast, trapped until the love of Beauty set him free. We all have our beastly side, which proves harmful to others and ourselves. Yet the Christian message is that through God's Spirit we can begin, little by little, some days more than others, to live our lives more in tune with God's dictum to love, with beautiful, wild abandon. Unlike the Beast's metamorphosis, Peter's transformation did not happen overnight. The truth of the matter is that God's New Creation in us takes a lifetime, a gradual changing known in theological terms as sanctification.

The traditional Christian name for the beast with which we fight is sin. Sin is not a popular topic with broad-minded thinkers like us. And yet, it is unavoidable. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once said that, "Original sin is the only verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith." Indeed, daily our newspapers verify sin in the stories, which speak of our estrangement from one another, in words that underscore the brokenness of the human condition. Words like "ethnic cleansing," "sexual abuse," "starvation," and "drug addiction" scream out that something is terribly wrong with our world. And if we are honest, when we look deep within ourselves, we know that at times, all is not as it should be.

Are we left alone to fight the beast as best we can? No. The hope of the Christian Gospel is that even Jesus wrestled with his own beasts. He faced temptation. Eventually he found himself on a cross. But the beastly cross was not the last word. The beauty of resurrection and new life give us hope in our beastliness today. Just like the fairytale when Beauty's love brought the Prince out of the Beast, Christ's love can transform our lives so that here and there, in big ways and small ones too, we are being changed into something more beautiful; we are becoming a New Creation. Peter's story didn't end with his denial of Christ and the rooster crowing. He again met the risen Lord and was given a new lease on life.

God's transforming power can make our world and us more beautiful more livable. When we give blood that another

might live, when we pray for our enemies, when we build houses with Habitat for Humanity, when we visit a lonely person or speak a word of encouragement, our world becomes a better place. As God has loved us, we have the opportunity to love each other and in so doing help transform one another like Beauty's love transformed the Beast. We can reach out to another and let God's love flow through in kind words and deeds.

In our struggles and confusion, in our half-hearted attempts to really make progress, God loves us. It is this divine love that has the power to make something beautiful out of something beastly, to continue the New Creation in our world and in each of us, now and forevermore. AMEN.

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## **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Loving God, amidst the warmth and beauty of summer we turn our hearts and minds to you. This creation of yours staggers the imagination as we ponder its beauty and brilliance. Human life boggles our minds too. The mystery of human love, the birth of a child, the sound of moving music, the sight of great art, and persons who make sacrifices for the sake of others all inspire us. Ours is truly an amazing world, but not everything that happens is good. For those suffering as a result of disasters, natural or human made, we ask your comfort and help. For the racial divisions that divide neighbor from neighbor, we pray for understanding and reconciliation. For victims of abuse and neglect, for those who are hungry and homeless, for those who are feeling depressed and hopeless, we ask your assistance. Help us become part of the solution.

Thank you for listening, O God, and thank you for caring...through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.