



Have We Lost Our Sense of Beauty and Wonder?

One of the bedrock affirmations of the Bible is found in the first chapter of Genesis, where God, after creating the world, judged that it was good. Even with the fall in the third chapter of Genesis, the goodness of creation, even of humanity itself, is not completely erased. Though the world is often convulsed by natural and moral evil, there is still the promise from God that all creation will be redeemed and renewed, whether in the prophecies of Second Isaiah or the visions of the book of Revelation. It is our trust and hope in God's promise of redemption that allows us to continue to see the beauty and wonder in the world around us, in spite of all indications to the contrary.

Life can be tough. At times it can be very tough. There is enough ugliness and brutality and suffering in the world to destroy the spirits of even the most optimistic people. To live without the redemptive and renewing promises of God means that one must find their source of beauty and wonder in the natural world. Beauty and wonder is there, indeed, in creation, but it is so fleeting and so transitory as to be ephemeral: here in a moment, then gone forever. Certainly the beauty in our world cannot stand up forever against the rampant forces of decay and debasement.

One way modernity has sought to get around this is by attempting to redefine what beauty and wonder are. Human-created systems of beauty, especially since the end of the nineteenth century, have attempted to gild the lily, to artificially create beauty, but this beauty is often so superficial and obviously fake that it soon becomes a parody of itself, like the Kardashians. But the poison of false beauty, when combined with rampant media hype, is so destructive to the spirits of far too many persons.

Shorn of any sense of promise and hope, and the transcendent power of God to deliver on them, true beauty and wonder are difficult, if not impossible. Many contemporary artists, indeed, seem to recognize this almost instinctively. These

modern artists rightly see the attempts to sell and commodify these false senses of beauty and wonder for what they are: manipulative and insubstantial. But having seen through the veil, they are still unable to lift their eyes to find true beauty and wonder. They seemingly conclude that the only avenue for art is in forms of realism, a materialism that sees beauty only as a scam and believes that the present reality, with all its grittiness, is the only thing left. This art, then, is jarring and brutally honest about the human condition but with little sense of any beauty or wonder of a redemptive quality. So many of the modern arts have been taken over by rage and despair or by simple ugliness.

The Christian gospel proclaims that those who have sat in such darkness have seen a great light, the light of renewal and redemption through the power of God. For those who have seen this light, the whole world looks different. They find the real beauty and wonder in the world that others cannot see, for their eyes are fixed on God. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. knew this. In his crusade against the rampant forces of segregation and inequality, he was well aware of the evil and ugliness in the world. Yet he would not be defined by those things. He could lift his eyes to God and see the promise of a new day, a day of hope and justice, a day, it might be said, of beauty and wonder. This was not just a Marxist opiate but a bedrock conviction that God's creative work in this world is not yet finished.

It is so easy to be seduced by the cheap and false versions of beauty and wonder around us, or, having been awakened to these deceptions, to despair of any transcendent beauty and wonder to transform us and our world. But there is more than this, and it is to God's promises that we cling. As Paul wrote to his friends in Philippi:

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. (Phil 4:8–9)

Think about these things, indeed, in the beauty, awe, and wonder of our God and of God's creation.

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