

March 10, 2024 Fourth Sunday in Lent

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Isaiah 43:16-21, Revelation 21:1-4

"The Art of Seeing: Our Future"

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Her arms rested on the sill of the window. She stood there for a moment with her eyes closed, feeling the gentle breeze coming off the sea and caressing her face. When she opened her eyes she gave them a moment to focus, allowing the blues of the sky and the sea to mingle in her mind. The view appeared limitless as did the possibilities it offered.

The painting on our bulletin cover this morning, the third in our sermon series, "The Art of Seeing," is "Young Woman at a Window" by Salvador Dali. It employs the motif of the Rückenfigur. This is when a central figure in a painting is seen from behind. The Rückenfigur serves as a surrogate for the viewer, to experience what they are witnessing. In this painting, the woman is looking beyond the limits of where she is to the boundlessness that exists in the greater world. So, we too, are invited to look beyond the limits we perceive to a boundlessness that exists in the greater world.

One of the gifts of our reformed tradition is our core belief that we are reformed and always reforming. In other words, we believe that God is continually at work in the world and what God is doing today may reveal God in a way we have never understood God before. We are called to being open to how the Spirit is moving in our midst in ways that may not be familiar but are how God is choosing to lead us forward in this time and place. We are called to the revelation that although we may unintentionally place limits upon God, God has no such limits. We are invited to join that young woman gazing out the window and allow ourselves to ruminate on what exists beyond the boundaries in which we have chosen to live. What might we see if we allow ourselves to view the future remembering the Angel Gabriel's word to Mary, "For nothing will be impossible with God."? What kind of future would we see then?

When I look at this painting it appears to me that the young woman is waiting. I wonder for what she is waiting. Is she waiting for someone to come and invite her out beyond her room? Is she waiting for some sign? Is she waiting until she finds the sufficient courage to journey forth?

The Rabbi Sharon Brous tells of an exercise she did with her congregation. She asked a single, simple question, "What are you waiting for?" Each person anonymously jotted down something on a card and she collected them. Some were very pedestrian like waiting for dinner. One, which she assumed to be her son, wrote the "LEGO set, the Star Wars Ultimate Millennium Falcon."

She writes, "aside from those, here's what I found: Several people, more than I could believe, wrote they were waiting for someone to tell them they're beautiful. Three were waiting for someone to tell them to write a book. Someone really wanted to be encouraged to start his own band. More than a dozen wrote that they wanted to be told that they were worthy of love. A few were specifically waiting for their parents to say they loved them, even though they hadn't turned out the way their parents had dreamed. Some were waiting to not feel so sad, or feel so lost. Others, for a chance to make a difference. A few were waiting for the day they'd wake up and just work and live and love without being paralyzed by self-doubt. One was waiting to forgive himself for his friend's suicide." (Brous, pp. 71-72)

It does beg the question. For what are you waiting? When you gaze out into the future and all of its possibilities, for what are you waiting before you step forward into that future? How does the presence and promises of God inform or shape both the nature of your waiting and for what you are waiting?

Rabbi Brous goes on to write about how she felt after reading all of those cards. "I wanted to reach out and hug them all. I wanted to say: 'You really need to start your own band! The world needs more music—we need *your* music...You are worthy of love! You, and your tender heart...Your friend's suicide is not your fault. And your guilt is keeping you from grieving his death. Instead, do something to make his memory a blessing...Even if your family never accepts you, I do. This community does, and God does. Just the way you are.'" (p. 75)

What she did share with them were words from the beloved Rabbi Eliezer in the Talmud, who "warned his students to 'repent one day before you die.'...But his students asked, 'How will we know when we're going to die, so that we can be sure to repent the day before?' 'All the more so,' the Rabbi replied, 'do what you need to do today, in case today is your last.' If we believe we live at the edge of death, he's saying, we'll bring a different kind of purpose to every encounter. We won't squander precious time, waiting." (Brous, pp. 75-76)

One way to see this painting is as a juxtaposition of the very real limits of our mortal lives represented by the room in which she stands, and the boundless possibilities of that vista, of what the future could hold with God, who has promised to do new things, beside us.

Whether we would have had something specific to write upon one of those waiting cards or not; whether we are eight or eighty, we are all called to step into the future. Each day is the leading edge of a future that has yet to occur. Of that we have no choice. The choice we do have is whether we step into each new day only seeing the walls around us and the limited

choices of solely what we have previously known. Or whether we can truly hear the words from our scripture texts this morning.

Our text from Isaiah is from what is sometimes called the Book of Consolation. It was originally offered to those who were living in exile and in desperate need of hope. In their dislocation and alienation they likely see no discernable future and no possibilities beyond the four walls of their captivity. The prophet first reminds them of how in the past God freed them from slavery, leading them through the Red Sea, "Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters..." And then brings them word that God's powerfully transforming care is not limited to days gone by but is unfolding in the days to come, "Do not remember the former things, or consider things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." A window is opened to the exiles by which they can see a future previously impossible to envision.

And our text from the book of Revelation brings words of hope to a persecuted people; word of "a new heaven and a new earth...See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." The people who feel utterly trapped have a window opened to them revealing that every limit and boundary of our frail mortality will be lifted from them with God's arrival.

We may not be in exile. We may not be persecuted. But we all run the risk of being so bogged down in the limitations of

our current reality that we cannot see out the window to the boundless possibilities the divine is offering us.

Our future with God is as wide open as the vistas of endless sea and sky. For what are you waiting? Step beyond the walls that are holding you back and step into your future with the God who has promised us that all things are possible.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Brous, Sharon, *The Amen Effect*, Avery, New York, 2024.