

Angels in Stone

1 Samuel 16:1-13

¹The LORD said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.” ²Samuel said, “How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.” And the LORD said, “Take a heifer with you, and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.’” ³Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.” ⁴Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, “Do you come peaceably?” ⁵He said, “Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.” And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

⁶When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the Lord’s anointed is now before the LORD.” ⁷But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” ⁸Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” ⁹Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” ¹⁰Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, “The LORD has not chosen any of these.” ¹¹Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.” ¹²He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.” ¹³Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

Ephesians 5:8-14

⁸For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light — ⁹for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. ¹⁰Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ¹²For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; ¹³but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, ¹⁴for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,
“Sleeper, awake!
Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”

He was a young, young man, all of 21 years old, trying to make it as an artist in Rome.

And even in Rome, even in this beautiful city, of beautiful people, who loved beautiful things-

even in Rome it wasn't easy to make it as an artist. He had struggled for months trying to find a patron, trying to find someone who would appreciate and support his talent, but he kept running into brick wall after brick wall.

“What’s your name, again?” they would always ask.

“Michelangelo. Michelangelo Buonaroti,” he’d reply.

“Never heard of you, kid. Go waste someone else’s time.”

And it went like this for months. Finally, just as he was about to give up Michelangelo was getting his hair cut. The guy cutting his hair was chatty and they got to talking. And when the haircutter found out Michelangelo was an artist, he was excited and said he was, too. He said he had tried to do exactly what Michelangelo was doing, but eventually he ran out of money and started cutting hair, and the rest was history, you know. When they were done the barber asked to see some of his work, and Michelangelo showed him a few of his drawings. Immediately realizing this kid was something special the barber told him that he had some friends at a monastery nearby who had promised him space on a wall if only he would do a fresco of St. Francis. And he would except he couldn't draw very well. And he told Michelangelo, “But you’ve got a gift, my friend. Yes you do.” The barber said he’d split the commission with him if he would make a drawing. And so Michelangelo produced a sketch of St. Francis receiving the stigmata, the marks of the cross, the barber was delighted, and he did a great job of it. And everyone else was blown away asking him where he’d been hiding himself all those years. And wondrously, rather than taking all the credit for himself, the barber said the guy they really want

to meet was this amazing newbie named Michelangelo. And that was how Michelangelo got his first break- from a barber who took the time to see what no one else could.

It's so easy to overlook the beauty that's around us every single day. We do it all the time- especially when we're not expecting to see anything interesting, like those patrons who assumed that just because *they'd* never heard of Michelangelo well he must not be that great. There's a famous recent example of this. Psychologists did an experiment on what is known as value attribution. On a crisp January morning in 2007 at exactly 7:51 in the morning an ordinary looking guy in jeans and a ball cap took out his violin in the L'enfant subway station in Washington, DC and started to play. 1,097 people walked past as this guy performed one piece after another starting with Bach's Sonatas and Partitas for Unaccompanied Violin, one of the most difficult and amazing works ever. One man paused for a few minutes before walking on. A couple of kids stared with interest. But the rest of the world just passed by oblivious.

The violinist was Joshua Bell, probably the most famous living violinist in the world. The instrument he was playing was a 3.5 million dollar Stradivarius. And the music he was playing was probably the finest quality any of those people had ever heard up close like that. Normally, it'll cost you around 70 bucks a seat to hear this guy if you're lucky enough to get a ticket. But that morning, nearly 1,100 people just walked by like nothing was happening, because, well...it didn't look like anything was happening. He was in a tux, or a concert hall. There wasn't a crowd around him. As one author put it: "Without realizing it the subway commuters attributed the value they perceived- the ball cap, the jeans, playing in a subway station-to the quality of the performance."

When we aren't expecting it or looking for it, it's so easy to overlook the beauty that's all around us.

Isn't that what's happening in the First Samuel story? Israel's first king, King Saul has finally jumped the shark and God has decided it's time for regime change. But instead of cruise missiles and Libyan rebels God has decided to send the prophet Samuel to just go and anoint someone else king instead. Now even though it's Samuel, who everybody knows and respects, what's he's doing, setting out to anoint another king while one is already on the throne- it is treasonous. And this is why everyone is quaking in their boots when Samuel shows up in Bethlehem.

But Samuel tells them all he's there to sacrifice and he tells them all to come and join them. And when he sees Jesse, he makes sure he comes and brings his boys. So, if you can imagine it, it's like a male version of Cinderella. All of the guys are out there in the desert standing around a huge fire, enjoying the sacrificial BBQ. And then Samuel starts looking for the next king. And all of the biggest guys in the village are out there all lined up, nervously sizing each other up, each one wondering if he was tall enough and strong enough to be king. Because, of course, in their minds that's what a king must be- tall, and strong, and all that. And Samuel walks up to each hopeful and gets up right close to them, staring at them, and poking and prodding them like it's some weird desert cross between the Westminster Kennel Club dog show and the Miss America pageant.

And finally Samuel gets through with all of them. He's put the proverbial glass slipper on every foot, but none of them has fit. He roars: "Is this IT? Is this EVERYONE?" And, of course, it isn't. And when Samuel sees this on Jesse's face he confronts the old man, who admits that his youngest son is at home in the fields. But, he's just a boy. He's just a little kid. He's just scrawny and nothing to look at, really. I mean he just didn't want to waste Samuel's time. But the look on Samuel's face urged Jesse to send for his son and to tell him to run.

And when young David finally made it, all dirty from the fields, and all out of breath from running- Samuel begins to smile. In fact he beams. And just like that he pulls out his flask of oil and, committing high treason in front of God and everybody, he breaks the oil over the boy's head and blesses him, anointing him king. And the funniest thing happens. Although they never saw it before- now all of a sudden they can see what Samuel could. There really was something about David. He was young. He was small. But there really was something about him- something about his eyes and the way he carried himself. There was something so beautiful there. Why hadn't they seen it before?

But sometimes, sometimes it's just hard to see the beauty, the good, that is already around you- especially in people. Maybe you saw it once, long ago, but now you're used to it. And it just fades into the background. Or maybe you've never seen it- because you aren't looking, because you've been taught somehow not to expect to see anything important or special in THAT person's face- because of their gender, or their sexual orientation, their age, their education level, or their political views. I mean why look when you *know* there's nothing to see?

But you know, this isn't true for some of you out there. Some of you are actually pretty good at seeing others. Some of you are truly gifted at seeing and appreciating the face of Christ in other people. You have the ability to notice people's gifts, even when they aren't like yours, and you aren't jealous or threatened- you just are appreciative. And you tell them how amazing they are. And they love to be around you because of this. You make them feel good about how God has made them. Some of you are really quite good at this. For you what's hard, what feels impossible even, is seeing this beauty, this God given beauty in yourself. You're so good at helping others to think highly of themselves and to keep their chins up, but when it comes to you- you can be just so blind, and so hard and cruel on yourself.

Part of what makes Michelangelo's work so amazing is that he went about it differently than anyone around him. All of the sculptors in his day were taught that when you get your block of marble, your huge, enormous, imposing block of marble- you never start with the stone, you always start with your vision. You never start with the stone. You always start with your vision. You will spend hour after hour creating a design for the rock, before you even pick up a chisel or feel the smooth, cool face of the stone on your hand. And then after you have your plan, your design, then you'll mark the rock. You'll literally impose your vision on this unyielding stone. Sculpting was seen as a kind of battle, a kind of war between artist and element.

But not Michelangelo. Not Michelangelo. Though he used them, Michelangelo didn't start with plans and designs when he was sculpting. He always started with the stone first. He always started with the stone. Unlike other sculptures he would actually make the journey to Carrara to the marble quarry himself. He would spend time with each block, studying them,

living with them- until he found just the right pieces. And then he would sit in front of those blocks for hours- gazing at them, letting his eyes follow the curving lines and fractures in the rock. For every block was different. Every block he said was capable of a different shape. The job of a sculpture he was famous for saying was not imposing his design on the rock, but learning how to see the shape already hidden in the rock, and then just carving the rest away.

It is said that once a little boy walked by as he was finishing a piece. And when the master was done, the boy asked him how he did it. And Michelangelo said: "I saw the angel already in the stone, and then I carved until I set him free."

And so many of us are like those other sculptors, those normal sculptors when it comes to our lives. We have these ideas, these designs, these plans about what our lives, what WE are supposed to be like. Sometimes we get these designs about the people we're supposed to be from the people around us- our parents, our family. And sometimes we don't even know where these ideas even come from. But we do- we have these ideas about what we're supposed to be like, what our bodies should look like, who we're supposed to fall in love with, what we're supposed to do for a living, even what thoughts and feelings we should be having. And when we don't measure up, when we have parts of us that don't fit the mold- we just want to hammer away at these parts of ourselves. Oh, we take hammers to ourselves in the most violent of ways inside- ways that often no one else even gets to see. Just us.

Oh some of us, we are so good at seeing the face of Christ in others- but we are so blind when it comes to seeing it in ourselves. And in this way, we're more like the Ephesians. Paul was talking to them about their own darkness and their light. And he says something so amazing, although it's so hard to believe. He tells the Ephesians that in Christ every part of us

already is light. Even the parts we keep hidden, the parts that don't fit our plan, our idea of ourselves, the parts we're ashamed of- in Christ, he says, they have a place. And the thing to do with these parts that don't seem to fit is to raise them up. Raise them up, these parts- expose them to the light of day, he says. Paul says all that raising everything up and bringing into the light, it can be transformative. We can see that, in Christ, these other aspects are just part of us. Even if we aren't thrilled about them. We don't need to be at war with them. We certainly don't need to keep hammering away at them like we do. In fact there may even be a day, he says, if we keep bringing our whole selves into the light, there may even be a day when we come to value these unwanted aspects, these orphaned fragments- we come to see that even they have something to offer.

And I believe this. It's the strangest thing to me but I have found it to be almost a rule that the parts that we sometimes can't stand about ourselves and wish we could get rid of- these are the parts that others sometimes love the most. Four years ago this summer my family buried my grandmother on my mom's side- Grandmother Cashdollar. She was a school teacher and church lady all her life. She volunteered with the willing workers, and had so many pink sweaters we all called her the "pink grandmother". She was so incredibly nice. She never said a bad word in all the time I knew her. My mom said once when she was a girl Grandma Cashdollar hit her finger with a hammer and yelled, "Oh 'D'!" but they all assumed that even that just stood for 'darn'. And she had this strong moral compass. When she was a little bit younger, she would fly down to Texas to stay with my mom and I for a few weeks. One spring she came out and my mom and I were really into this new TV series called Moonlighting with

Cybil Shepherd and Bruce Willis. One night we noticed that she had literally turned around in the recliner chair she was sitting in. My mom and I looked at each other with a kind of amused expression on our faces. And my mom asked her, mom- why have you turned around in your chair. And she looked up with a none too veiled expression of criticism on her face telling us she didn't like Moonlighting for, and I quote: "It was a SEXY show." Yes, it was a sexy show. And the way she said it made it very clear she thought WE should be turned around in our chairs as well.

She was such a nice person, such a good person. But some of my favorite moments with her were when I asked her to tell me about the times she wasn't so "nice". When she was a girl, for instance, her mother had died young, and she in many ways helped raise all of the other children- quite a lot of responsibility for a little girl. And one time she was up in the attic, I believe, and their family had this big mirror. For some reason the kids had it down on the floor. And, my grandmother told me with this terrible look on her face, and she just got this idea into her head that maybe she could walk across that mirror. And right there, with all her siblings watching, she just started to tip toe across that mirror, and of course she made it to about the middle of it, when they all heard that terrible cracking noise. And you could tell this moment still pained her a little.

Or there was the time that some guinea fowl, these large birds were out in her garden digging up her plants. And this tiny little woman, this woman who only wore pink sweaters in the entire time I knew her, she took down my grandfather's shot gun, and she ran out the front door yelling at the top of her lungs and she shot those birds dead.

And once she was on a trip with my grandfather, driving across the country like they loved to do, and he was asleep in the passenger side, and they were on some highway. And up ahead of her, she saw this big rock in the road that some truck must have dropped. Now, and I asked her this every time, couldn't she have swerved out of the way? And she said she absolutely could have done that- she had plenty of time and there weren't folks around her. But she just decided she wasn't going to move for that dumb old rock. So she lined up the wheels of her car and gave it a little bit of extra gas, even- but that rock started to look a LOT bigger as they got closer. And it wound up flipping them off the highway. That had to be a terrible way for my grandfather to wake up. Fortunately, no one was killed, but my grandmother wound up breaking her back in a few places and had to live in the basement for sometime I understand until she was all healed up.

And the way she told these stories, she was just so filled with regret. I'm sure had she the chance she would have chiseled every one of them out of her life story, out of who she was- but I'm so glad they were there. Because those stories, well they made her so much more real to me. And they made her so very much better than nice.

Each of you us is an angel hidden in stone. For some of us the stone is a little thicker than others, but the angel remains- waiting to be found. May the great artist keep working on us, until we're free. **Amen.**