

July 12th: Wrestling with God

Again, welcome to this new summer series—this will be a time of year when we take a break from our more traditional sermon series to explore more creative ways of engaging with God and growing in our faith. This is an opportunity to expand our spiritual journey by deepening our curiosity and trying new things, so I hope that this season will give you a new perspective or fresh insight.

The practice that we are entering into each week is called Visio Divina—which is similar to a practice called Lectio Divina. In that practice, a passage of scripture is read multiple times, each time paying attention to a word or phrase through which God might speak. Visio Divina is similar in the sense that it invites us into prolonged attention and introspection, but the object of our devotion is different. We will hear scripture passages each week that relate to the theme of the day, but our practice will center on a piece of artwork that we will reflect on together. This art will be from a variety of mediums, cultures, and time periods, all with the goal of using our visual sense to learn something new or receive new wisdom.

I will first offer a brief reflection on our piece for today, and then I will invite us to begin our practice. Whether you are new to Visio Divina or you've practiced it before, I will offer some additional instructions and potential questions to consider—but you are welcome to engage in any way that makes sense for you.

Before we begin, I invite you to pray with me.

Vast Creator, there is much about our world and ourselves that we do not understand. We wrestle with the mystery of our universe, and we struggle to cope with the conflict and violence that plagues our culture. We wish for answers, but more than that, we wish for your reassurance. We need your divine comfort to help us navigate our busy days and confusing lives. Be our companion

this morning, O God, and grant us your grace as we discern what it means to be your creation. Amen.

I have found myself drawn to seascapes—I could sit on a beach or by the shore for hours just listening to the sounds and sensations of the water. When I travel with my mom or my dad, they wait patiently for me to take my eleven thousand photos, because I use them to transport myself back to those moments. When I have the opportunity to walk along Alki Beach, I breathe in the salty air, and feel buoyed by the sense that the tides are rushing up to greet me. It is one of my happy places, and I have decided that living near the water is one of my life non-negotiables. I must be close by. I must be able to drive or bike to the sea.

So it seemed fitting that I introduce this series by meditating on one of my absolute favorite pieces of art, which also finds its inspiration in a view of the wind and waves.

To start us off, here's a little background on our image for today.

This painting, *Monk by the Sea*, was completed by the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich in 1810. Together with its companion painting, *Abbey in the Oakwood*, it hung in the Berlin Academy exhibition of that same year, and both paintings were purchased by King Wilhelm III for the royal collection. Even centuries later, these two paintings remain together, now hung side by side in the National Gallery of Berlin.

While both paintings offer a kind of eerie and haunting commentary on faith and humanity, this one is my favorite for a few reasons. First, many art historians and cultural critics name *Monk by the Sea* as Friedrich's most radical composition—especially for its time period, when many traditional landscape paintings focused on including greater detail. In contrast, the newer romantic school of painters sought to capture the wild and epic quality of nature—the sublime reality of towering mountain scenes, passionate clouds, and beautiful lakes and streams. These pieces of art were meant to elicit a

combination of awe and terror as the viewer gazed at both the vastness and unpredictability of the elements. Like his contemporary, JMW Turner, Friedrich was drawn towards moodiness, either with light or with colors that melted into each other, creating a sense of atmosphere and raw emotion. There is certainly moodiness in this image—the deep blues evoke a sense of gloom, or at least the idea that our seaside location is overcast and hazy.

Compared to other artworks, this one is radical in its seeming simplicity. The composition is dominated by the roaring sea and sky, leaving only a tiny sliver of the low dune visible to our eyes. There is light above and darkness below, all slightly obscured by a light layer of fog. At first, it seems difficult to discern where we should begin—where should our eyes go? It seems like our gaze gets tumbled around by the gusts and gales along the ocean. The emptiness can be overwhelming.

But finally, our eyes might land on the small, almost imperceptible figure, located off center, on the left hand side of the frame. Cloaked in shadow, hidden by a long, dark garment, the only clue to his identity revealed in the painting's title. And this is the second reason I love this painting so much: I feel a personal connection to the tiny monk who stands on the shore—the human being who dares to face the waves and wind. He's turned away from us at a distance—we can't imagine that we are right behind him on the sand, joining him from his viewpoint. But we can observe him from afar, just as he observes the sea in front of him.

We don't know how long the monk has been standing here, it could be minutes, or it could be hours—he seems like the sort who could be used to long meditative silences. Like me, I think he's been drawn to the sea for a purpose. I think he's come to this specific location to listen for something—whether it's the rhythm tides or the voice of the divine. I think he's found himself on this dune because he needs to wrestle with something, maybe even wrestle with God, and the best he could do was to stand face to face with God's wild creation. Maybe he's come to observe something that is untameable,

something that is beyond his human reach or capacity. We don't know exactly, but we can imagine all kinds of possibilities.

What does it mean to wrestle with God? What does it look like to grapple with the vastness of our universe and the uncertainties of the life of faith?

Let's take a quick look at scripture to see if we can find a starting point.

Our text for today comes from the Book of Genesis, at the very beginning of our Bible. In this book, our biblical author describes the life and faith of the early generations of God's people, including a man named Jacob. During Jacob's life, he faced both external and internal conflict—he fought with his twin brother, was estranged from his family, and struggled with what to do to find healing. In this particular chapter, Jacob is traveling with his family, and sends them ahead to make camp on the other side of a stream. When he prepares to sleep alone, a man comes to him, and wrestles with him all night. Eventually, the man wrenched Jacob's leg by the hip, and Jacob is forced to let him go. But before he does, Jacob tells the man, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

This is the blessing that the man gives Jacob: "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." From there, Jacob names this place, Peniel, meaning "face of God," because this was the place where he came into contact with the divine. Jacob walks away from this encounter with a limp, a sign that he was touched by God and survived.

As we think about this passage, it sparks some questions for me about this painting.

If the monk by the sea is here to wrestle with God, how will he walk away changed? What wound or new marker will he carry away from this dune? What story will he tell about this time of reflection?

And the same questions apply to us, the viewers of this piece of art.

When we wrestle with our own lives and bring those struggles to God, how does an encounter with God change us? What will we carry with us to remind ourselves of this transformation? Is it a fresh perspective, a new way of seeing ourselves, or maybe a place that we keep coming back to?

If we enter into this time of Visio Divina, what will result from our wrestling today, my friends? I'll leave that for you to find out. To prepare, let me frame our practice. In just a few moments, I will cue some music to begin, and for about 5 minutes, we will sit in silence to engage with this painting and this story. As you entered this morning, you might have received a piece of paper with the four stages of Visio Divina, but I will also describe them for you now.

First, I invite you to Gaze at the painting on the screen. Look slowly and thoroughly, taking a first glance, noting the colors, movement, textures, people, places and things. This is simply a preliminary step, as you allow your soul to open and interact with the image.

Second, when you are ready, you can enter a time of Reflection. This is a deeper look, meant to engage your imagination. How does this image inform or illuminate your relationship with God? How does it speak to your spiritual journey?

Third, when you've had a chance to reflect, you can start to Respond with prayer. Did the image remind you of an experience, person or issue for which you'd like to offer thanksgiving or intercession? Did it open a new awareness, or spark a conviction? Offer that prayer to God.

And finally, the last step is to Rest. Sit with the painting again. Notice how God's presence is with you in this space of relaxation and refreshment. How will you take this sense of peace into the rest of your day? Remember: Gaze, Reflect, Respond, and Rest. Or simply take these moments to breathe deep before the busy week ahead. It's up to you.

Now, settle into your chair, take a second to push away any distractions, and focus on this encounter. You may begin.

music

Thank you, my friends. I hope that wherever your mind drifted, or whatever God brought into your heart, you will leave this sanctuary like our patriarch Jacob, who was touched by God.

Amen.