

1st Sunday of Advent “The Divine Sculptor”

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How many of you have been to Florence, Italy and saw Michelangelo colossal statue of David depicting the moment before his historic battle with Goliath? Of course, even if you haven't been there to see it in person, you all know the statue I am talking about, right? Seeing it in person is very worthwhile, of course. The first time I saw this statue in person, my first impression was how tall the statue is (seventeen feet high). During my first visit I also gained a greater appreciation for the advantages of statues over paintings. You see, when I first walked around this statue, I was impressed by how David looks majestic and sure of himself from one angle, something you would expect from the biblical story of David's encounter with Goliath. However, as you slowly walk around the statue while looking at his face, you begin to notice that David's eyes and face betray a glimmer of fear. You see if David is seventeen feet tall, one wonders how tall is Goliath? I must have spent an hour walking around this statue as every detail and angle of this masterpiece began telling me the bible story anew from the perspective of Michelangelo. It also made me think about the Goliaths we sometimes face in the Spirit life, whatever that metaphor means for you.

What is also interesting is how this masterpiece was created. In 1501, when Michelangelo began working on this statue, legend has it he began with a flawed piece of marble. If this was the case, he did this probably for a couple of reasons. First, because the marble was flawed, he probably got a good deal for the marble. Secondly, however, and more profound a reason, Michelangelo reportedly said that when he first saw the slab of marble, he could actually see David inside the marble. He said that his artwork only consisted of removing the excess bits of rubble from the slab. No one else could see David in that chunk of rock. But Michelangelo could. And after four years of hard work, millions have appreciated Michelangelo's vision of David for centuries.

I mention this because our first reading from Isaiah introduces the season of Advent very well. Isaiah writes, “O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay and you are the potter; we are the work of your hands.” The prophet Isaiah is writing this during the time of the Babylonian Exile. This was a horrific time for the biblical Jews. They were a conquered people who watched their temple in Jerusalem burned to the ground as they were hauled off to a foreign land. They had to wait seventy years before they were liberated. As a people, they felt like a flawed piece of marble. They felt like cheap unformed clay. It is Isaiah's hope and prayer that God, the divine artist, will be able to form the clay of their lives into a masterpiece again.

And don't we all have days or even years when we feel like that? Days or even years when we feel like flawed marble or a clump of clay? Perhaps we feel that way sometimes at work or in the effort to find work, sometimes we might feel that way at home, in our relationships with family members, or perhaps we feel that way with the person we see in the mirror each day, struggling to better ourselves each day, feeling like every step forward we take two steps back, or perhaps in how we are dealing with a personal struggle, like an addiction or debilitating illness? Perhaps we even feel this way in our relationship with God, wondering what God wants for us as we make our way through life, pondering what God's vision is for us. These are all Advent themes.

You see, it is Isaiah's conviction that God is a lot like Michelangelo in that God sees in the imperfect marble of our existence a masterpiece waiting to be born. In our failures and in our successes, we can almost feel God's chisel at work on us if we take a moment to contemplate God's activity in our lives. Isaiah's analogy of the potter and the clay is even better. Take a moment and consider what is it like to be clay in the hands of an artist? I had the opportunity to visit a vase factory in Deruta, Italy near Assisi as well as the Belleek factory in Ireland. In both places, it was fascinating watching the artists take a clump of clay, place it on a spinning platform, and begin shaping the clay into a masterpiece. When you watch this, it is almost as if the clay has a mind of its own while the artists use their fingers and thumbs to carefully shape the clay into artwork. The artists would periodically pour water on the clay so that it would remain supple and moist as nothing much can be done with dried out clay. After the artwork is completed, it is then placed in a hot oven for a long time prior to being painted and finished. How many times in our lives have we felt God's hands working on the clay of our souls, giving us shape. How many times have we fought the divine artist's efforts? How many times have we felt like we are in that oven being tested by fire?

Isaiah's analogy of the potter and the clay is a good metaphor for life, whether we are living in the Babylonian exile or in 21st century America. Everything in this life is a preparation for everlasting life. No matter who we are, or what time or place we live in, everything in this life is a preparation for everlasting life. Life itself is a season of Advent, a time to keep vigil, a time to keep watch as Jesus invites us in the Gospel. During the times we feel like flawed marble or misshaped clay, it is good to remember that God has looked into the future of the human race and has seen a masterpiece. And no matter how you feel about your life circumstance right now, God has looked into your heart and has seen how beautiful you can be. All that is required of us is to allow God's hands into the clay of lives and allow God to make our failures and successes an opportunity for growth. As we allow God to shape us through the Advent of life, we take up the Lord's invitation to watch and see. God has already seen in each one of us a divine masterpiece. All that is necessary is for the bits of rubble to be brushed away.