

1st Sunday of Advent “The Divine Sculptor” 2020

Fr. Frank Schuster

I have shared with you before that the readings for this Sunday of Advent remind me of Michelangelo, particularly his colossal statue of David. You know which one I am talking about. You sincerely don't know what you are missing unless you have seen it in person. I have a trip back to Florence on my short list after the pandemic passes. The first time I saw this statue in person, something like 23 years ago, my first impression was how tall the statue is (seventeen feet high). During that 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 looked 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 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? It also made me think about the Goliaths we sometimes face in life and how naked we can feel to all of life's dangers.

What is also interesting is how this masterpiece was created. Recall that in 1501, when Michelangelo began working on this statue, legend has it he began with a flawed piece of marble. Set aside for a moment that he probably got a good deal for it, Michelangelo reportedly said that 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 burn 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 with how we are personally coping with the pandemic, perhaps in our relationships at home, or perhaps with the person we see in the mirror each day, struggling to understand ourselves and who we are meant to be. 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 calling us to keep watch for God's presence in our lives.

You see, 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 took a moment to contemplate God's activity in our lives. Isaiah's analogy of the potter and the clay is even better. What would it mean to let God shape us with his hands? During the times we feel like flawed marble or misshaped clay, it is good to remember that the bible tells us that God has looked into the future of the human race and has seen beauty. The Good News is God feels the same way about you. No matter how you feel about your life right now, God has looked into your heart and has seen a masterpiece. Believe it. All that is necessary now is to welcome Jesus into our hearts so that the bits of rubble can be brushed away.