



FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF ANN ARBOR

Pastor's Reflections by Paul Simpson Duke

February 8, 2012

As I mentioned on Sunday, some of us recently went to the Detroit Institute of Arts to see the exhibit, "Rembrandt and the Face of Jesus." There were fourteen of us, mostly from our Midweek Bible Study group. It was an excursion I will always be grateful to have made. More than sixty images of Jesus, mostly by Rembrandt, were assembled from collections across the world. It was breathtaking, and at the center of it was an obvious progression of Rembrandt's understanding of Jesus over time. The curators of the exhibit persuasively demonstrated two aspects of the artist's evolving sense of Jesus.

One shift was toward a new understanding that Jesus was truly Jewish. Before Rembrandt's time, European artists depicted Jesus as a Northern European, usually with chestnut hair and fair skin and often even with blue eyes. Such depictions still abound. Rembrandt followed this convention in at least the first two decades of his career, but to an unusual extent for the time, Amsterdam was a city of inter-cultural exchange and even interfaith dialogue, and Rembrandt's interaction with people in "the Jewish quarter" grew strong. Eventually a young Jewish man became his model for several paintings of Jesus. The difference is unmistakable and was a breakthrough in the history of Western art.

The other change in Rembrandt's portrayals of Jesus was a shift from external gesture to the inner soul. In his earlier work, the artist followed the convention of depicting the power of Jesus through the dramatic positioning of arms and heroic stance. But in time, and coinciding more or less with the shift from a gentile Jesus to a Jewish one, the drama of gesture gave way to a deep stillness. In the artist's later work, the power of Jesus resides no longer in raised arms but in profoundly reflective eyes. This Jesus has been living in sustained prayer contemplation. There is a haunting inwardness about him, and sometimes the trace of a smile. His words and his actions will be the fruit of long, observant silence. In such a face, in such eyes, is fathomless love.

I don't mean to be giving a lesson in art history, as if I could. But the time I spent with those depictions of Jesus has prompted some new thoughts, not only about Jesus himself, but about what it means for one's perception of Jesus to grow and deepen over time, as clearly happened with Rembrandt. Most of us could easily name some pop versions of him that we reject: Jesus the Pal, the Wimp, the Moralizer, the Destroyer, the American. And many of us can say gratefully that we now see him as much more fully human than we once did. But has our personal sense of him *deepened*? Do we find him *more* compelling, more captivating, awe-inspiring, challenging - someone we would give *anything* to follow, to love, to serve - than we did, say, ten years ago? If not, we may want to consider the possibility that we've gone a long time not taken him seriously at all.

In the second book of C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, when Lucy is reunited with the great lion (and Christ-figure) Aslan, she says to him in surprise, "You've grown!" He replies that he is the same as always, then adds, "Every year you grow, so shall I."

In the Rembrandt exhibit I was privileged to gaze on the brilliant artifacts of one man's deepening sense of Jesus as a man fully connected with his own people and living from boundless spiritual depths. The difference between the earlier and later paintings was astounding. I left, marveling more than ever at the powers of this artist, but, much more, moved by a vision of Jesus I had not contemplated sufficiently before. I hope we will be a church whose own perspectives on Jesus, by reflection and by practice, will not cease to grow, until we, as Paul said (Eph 3:18), "have the power to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth."

Children and Youth Christian Education

NURSERY care is available on the 3rd floor from 9:30 - 12:30

All children are welcome to worship with their families. After the Time as Children portion of the worship service, preschoolers - 1st grade leave for church school. Children in 2nd and 3rd grade are invited to Children's Worship in 201B.

Preschool - 1st Grade:

10:30 - 11:30 Church School (Rm. 202A&B)
11:30 - 12:30 Second Hour Church School
And Childcare (Rm. 202A&B)

Youth (6th - High School)

10:00 - 11:00 Worship
11:15 - 11:45 Youth Choir (Rm. 306)
11:45 - 12:30 Church School (Room 107)

2nd - 5th grade:

10:00 - 11:00 Worship (2nd and 3rd graders are invited to Children's Worship)
11:15 - 12:00 Church School (Rm. 202B)
12:00 - 12:30 Children's Choir (Rm. 306)

Children and Youth Music & Arts Ministry

11:15 - 11:45 Youth Choir (rm. 306) 12:00 - 12:30 Children's Choir (Rm. 306)

Adult Christian Education 11:30 - 12:30

The Story of Ruth (Astrid Beck, leader)

Lounge

Only four chapters long, the book of Ruth is a little jewel in the Old Testament. Ruth, an outsider from Moab, becomes central to the lineage of David and foreshadows the promised Messiah, Jesus. What was it that made her such a cornerstone to the faith of ancient Israel, and why was Ruth chosen for such an important role? We'll study this important little book to find out why.

Young Adult Class (Rev. Paul Simpson Duke, leader)

Room 108

This class consists of conversational Bible study, discussing texts from the Prophets. "Young Adult" is defined as mid-twenties to 40(ish!).

Other Adult Education Opportunities:

Wednesday Bible Study Bible Study meets at 1:30 p.m. in the Lounge, with Paul Simpson Duke leading a study of the Stories of David. Please join us for study, fellowship and snacks!

Adult Small Groups (ChristCare): Centered on Bible study, fellowship, mission, prayer and worship, we currently have two groups: one which meets monthly and the other which meets every other week. See Stacey, Paul or Sue Ellen for more information about joining a group.

College/University Students: **The Gathering** is for undergraduates and graduate students. We gather every Wednesday night at 5:30pm in the Campus Center for a free home-cooked meal, friendship, and study. This year our topic is "Images for the Struggles and the Joy: Help from the Psalms," led by Paul Simpson Duke. In addition to Wednesday night gatherings, we also get together for films, service projects, and social events. If you would like to be added to our email list for announcements, please see Stacey Simpson Duke.

First Baptist Church
517 E Washington Street
Ann Arbor, MI 48104-2015
734-663-9376
www.fbca2.org
office@fbca2.org

The Reverends Paul & Stacey Simpson Duke, Co-Pastors

Next
newsletter
deadline:

Sunday, February 19

The Ash Wednesday Service

As we enter the season of Lent, we reflect on our penitence and our mortality. Please join us on Wednesday, February 22, at 7:00pm, in the sanctuary, for a simple, somber service of prayer and ashes. Childcare will be provided.