Isaiah 61:10—62:3

Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7

John 1:1-18

Today’s gospel reading is one of the most beautiful passages in all of scripture. “In the beginning was the Word.” The whole of the passage is poetry and it is beautiful. But have you ever stopped to think what beauty is? How is it defined? What is it that makes something beautiful? I heard a radio program recently that suggests we often don’t recognize what beauty is until we know its story.

The program featured a man named Richard Seymour who, by trade, is a designer of things like deodorant dispensers and motorcycles and furniture. He is in demand globally by companies that want their products to be appealing. So Richard Seymour has thought a lot about beauty.

He even lectures on the subject. In one lecture he does an experiment with his audience by showing them a drawing and asking whether it is beautiful. It is a crayon drawing of a butterfly landing on a flower. From an objective standpoint, it is what is called primitive art, or folk art, and is characterized by simplicity and naïveté. He watches the audience as they look at the drawing. Most of them kind of shrug. They do not show signs of being in the presence of beauty.

Then he tells them the story of the picture.

He says, “This is the last act on this earth of a five-year-old girl named Heidi before she died of spinal cancer. It was the last thing she did; the last physical act. Look at the innocence and sincerity. Isn’t it beautiful?” Again he watches the faces in the room. They soften. One woman became tearful. They seemed to acknowledge that the drawing was beautiful just by the way they beheld it. Often we only see beauty once we knew its story.

So John the Gospel Writer gives us the story of Christmas. He goes all the way back to Genesis, to the beginning, when all things were made. Evoking the poetry of Genesis, John talks about the Word. He says, "The Word was with God and the Word was God." And then he tells the Christmas story in nine words:

“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.”

He makes this dramatic statement – that the eternal, endless God (expressed as “word”) – has been incarnated as human and come into the created world. And it is a thing of beauty – this God; this act of incarnation; this assertion that God longed so much to be with us that God became one of us.

A temporarily homeless family pausing long enough for the wife to give birth in a barn is not a thing of beauty. It’s pathetic. It is cruel and sad. But once you know the story, it becomes beautiful.

The other gospel writers don't take the route of poetry as John does in telling the Christmas story. They talk about genealogies and the political imperative that made Joseph and Mary temporarily homeless.

In talking about Jesus those other gospel writers use words like Messiah; Savior; Lord: all of which can be construed as military or political terms. Among all four gospel writers only Matthew mentions "Emmanuel" which means "God is with us." The Jewish prophets to whom Matthew harkens understood "God is with us" to mean: "God is on our side" or "God is for us." The name did not mean for them that "God has become one of us." Emmanuel. That was too beautiful to imagine.

Before John gets to his nine-word description of Christmas – “and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” – he has a lot to say about light. Without yet mentioning him by name, he says Jesus is "the light of all people" and that "the light shines in the darkness" and the darkness could not swallow it up.

Once again, John is following the book of Genesis. Genesis starts out: "In the beginning." So does the gospel of John. Then Genesis describes the act of creation. The very first thing to be created by God was light. John mentions light five times in his first chapter and ten more times throughout his gospel, quoting Jesus in some of his most memorable sayings:

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

"I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness."

We know darkness. Have you ever tried walking through an unfamiliar room that is completely dark? That’s almost a guaranteed busted toe or bruised shin. Have you ever awoken in the middle of the night in a hotel or someone else’s house and been confused about where you were? People who travel a lot often have this experience.

We know even more chilling darkness. Rogue governments with nuclear weapons that will not even sit at the international table. Economic systems that are not level playing fields. Over-crowded prisons disproportionately housing more dark-skinned people than can be found in our general population. And most of them are men. And most of those men are young.

We get confused when it’s dark. We lose our way. Darkness can terrify us with its specter of ghosts or demons – things we wouldn’t even think to be afraid of in daylight. If nothing else, darkness just stops us because we cannot see where we’re going or where we’ve been.

John says that a new light has begun to shine. It is the Christ light. It does far more than just illumine. It encourages. It renews. It inspires. We stand in this light and we are healed. We permit the light to stand in us – to take up residence in us – and by it, we radiate.

Divine light allows us to see who we are and what kind of possibility is within us. I once heard a notable athlete say about training that when you think you have hit your limit or ceiling, you are really only 60% of the way there. You have another 40%. There is a lot more possibility within us that we even know.

Divine light allows us to see what kind of society and world we have created in all its darkness. Divine light also illumines our minds, imaginations and desires to see the better world we can create.

Wholeness and healing – in persons and societies – can really only come about as we yield to the ways of God. This yielding is not the subservient capitulation of a broken people. It is a seismic shift in us – deep within – when we realize we don’t know everything; that we don’t hold everything together. Mystic Richard Rohr talks about this in terms of pushing the river. You don’t have to do that; it flows on its own. Coming to this marvelous realization is what yielding to God is all about.

Admittedly, it is a risk. Surrendering to God means taking a risk. It means risking that you will no longer be in control. It is the risk that you will be changed. It is the fear that you will give up more than you will gain. But it is the risk that leads us into life. Read life starts at ground zero of risk.

In the last few words we hear from John today he includes an amazing piece of the Christmas story. He says, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."

That is the story of Christmas. And it is beautiful!