

Sermon 2008 Pentecost 15

Text: Isaiah 51: 1-6

Theme: "Chipping Away the Rock to find the Art"

Quarries are ugly places. They are scars on the landscape that was once a beautiful meadow or a wooded hillside. But two things occur to me about the ugliness of a quarry. One is that although what is left behind is ugly, that which was taken out is often beautiful. The ugly quarry is the price we pay for those gorgeous granite countertops, those marble floor tiles and some of the most amazing art work possible. Michelangelo spoke of looking at a block of stone and seeing within it the beauty that needed to come out. He saw his calling as a sculptor as liberating the beauty that was hidden in the stone and from his hands came the *Pieta*.

The second thing that occurs to me is that beauty is in the eye of the beholder and perhaps quarries are just art in progress, beauty that has yet to be liberated from the stone. At the turn of the 20th century the Butcharts came to British Columbia to quarry the rich deposits of limestone to make Portland Cement. After the quarry was exhausted, Mrs. Butchart was not satisfied to have a huge gaping hole for her backyard, so she hired Japanese gardeners to come and transform the

quarry into a place of beauty. This is still one of most beautiful sunken gardens you will ever see and it never would have been there had the rock not been quarried.

I think of our lives a great deal like I think of a quarry. *We* might be totally satisfied with what is there before the mining is started. Perhaps the beauty is shallow, but so what? Who wants the pain and struggle of mining tons of rock? *We* might be satisfied but God is not. God knows what lies under our shallow layer of comfort and like a master sculptor, he slowly begins mining for the amazing art that lies beneath. St. Paul says

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Do not be conformed but be transformed. To be conformed would be to let the stone around us hem us in and forever bury the art that needs to break out. To be conformed would be to be satisfied with good enough and never delve into what might be. A block of marble has its own kind of natural beauty but the *Pieta* is a world away from that block of marble.

When Peter makes his confession that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, a glimpse of the beauty that lies beneath flashes past us. Peter the impetuous fisherman fades into the background and Peter the Bishop of Rome flashes into the foreground and we get to see the transformation that Jesus is doing. It is a slow process, however, full of two steps forward and one step back. Remember that next week when you hear Jesus say to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." It didn't take long for Bishop Peter to revert to fisherman Peter again. But for just a moment we saw the art that God was transforming from rock as he mined Peter.

Isaiah, speaking to people who were exiled, says,
"Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness,
you who seek the Yahweh:
look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.

God was sculpting his people. And sculpting is not painless for either the sculptor or the stone. Sculptors face many disappointments and many challenges when trying to bring the art from the stone and if

stone could feel, I imagine being chiseled feels a great deal like being exiled, like facing loss, like struggling with changes and choices and uncertainties.

And when we are finally liberated from our block of stone...on that great and glorious day when all the rubble is swept away and all that remains is that beautiful piece of art that we are - art that was once corrupted by sin, but is finally and completely liberated. What will we see?

The heavens will vanish like smoke.

The earth will wear out like a garment.

And those who live on it will die like gnats.

BUT!

my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed.

On that day, the day when Jesus returns for us, on that day we will be fully hewn from the rock and all the rubble will be swept away and we will see the incredibly beautiful art that God has made during our earthly journey. Sometimes, as we live in the quarry, we lose sight of what is art and what is rubble. The art within us wants to focus

on what is good and right, but the rubble is always distracted by things that don't endure. Be patient with yourselves and with each other. God is at work and he is a master sculptor. The chisel is painful sometimes and the waiting is burdensome but your beauty is coming out more and more every day. AMEN