

August 30th: Walking By Faith

Again, welcome to this final mediation of our summer series—this has been a time of year when we have taken a break from our more traditional sermon series to explore more creative ways of engaging with God and growing in our faith. This has been an opportunity to expand our spiritual journey by deepening our curiosity and trying new things, so I hope that this season has given you a new perspective or fresh insight.

The practice that we are entering into each week is called Visio Divina—which is similar to a practice called Lectio Divina. In that practice, a passage of scripture is read multiple times, each time paying attention to a word or phrase through which God might speak. Visio Divina is similar in the sense that it invites us into prolonged attention and introspection, but the object of our devotion is different. We have heard scripture passages each week that relate to the theme of the day, but our practice will center on a piece of artwork that we will reflect on together. This art has been from a variety of mediums, cultures, and time periods, all with the goal of using our visual sense to learn something new or receive new wisdom.

I will first offer a brief reflection on our piece for today, and then I will invite us to begin our practice. Whether you are new to Visio Divina or you've practiced it before, I will offer some additional instructions and potential questions to consider—but you are welcome to engage in any way that makes sense for you.

As we bring this series to a close, I invite you to pray with me.

God of Courage, in the moments of our deepest fear and doubt, you are there. You awaken in us a new sense of presence and power, empowering us to face any challenge or storm. When we are unsure of how to move forward, or uncertain about where to go, you offer us your hand and invite us to follow you. We listen for your encouragement now, as we prepare to answer your call in our own lives. Be with us, grant us strength, we pray. Amen.

The first time I went to the Art Institute in Chicago, I got lost in the modern art wing. Not the good kind of lost, the bad kind of lost. I had entered the museum from a side entrance, thinking it was a short cut to the European masters that I was so eager to see up close. Instead, I found myself in an open atrium with a floating staircase and giant windows—and a tiny sign that pointed me in what I thought was the right direction. As I walked, I caught the end of a museum tour—the guide was describing how these more contemporary pieces are just as valuable for our artistic imaginations as the famous masters of the past, which I didn't really listen to much in the moment, but I think is a good lesson for us today.

Compared to other pieces of art that I introduced to us earlier in our series, this is an image that is much more modern and therefore much less likely to be something that you have encountered before. And compared to the more structured or traditional images that we've seen, it might be slightly more unsettling—there's less history and less context to draw from, less familiarity to lean on. But on the other hand, I'm starting to see what the museum guide was talking about, because in these contemporary images, there's also more room to make meaning of our own. There's more space to let our minds wander, more ways of interpreting a particular scene or setting. This can be freeing, and I hope as you view this image now, you are drawn into the possibilities of what this piece of artwork might share with us.

This piece, "Walking on Water," comes from the artist Makoto Fujimara, an artist and author who fuses together Christian spirituality and contemporary art, relying on contemplative practice and the artistic legacy of expressionism. Although he was born in the United States, he was partially raised in Japan and completed a doctorate in Japanese painting techniques at Tokyo University of the Arts, where he studied under famous Japanese artists and trained in the art of Nihonga, which is a style of painting that gently applies mineral pigments and ink to traditional silk or paper.

In the execution of this particular piece, Fujimara has used crushed up azurite pigment, and applied those fine particles to a background of polished

gesso—which is a white primer often used to prepare a painting’s surface. Like the fresco technique that we learned about from Fra Angelico’s Annunciation, the azurite has bonded with the gesso, creating a solid image, much like a painting. And like fresco, which is a slow and deliberate process, Fujimara also paints at a relaxed pace—he is known as one of the most prominent figures in the “slow art” movement.

But what do we see when we encounter this piece?

Well, we can say that this painting is mostly composed of vibrant color and white space. It seems like the main character of the painting, the central focus if you will, is the movement of the lines that carries our eyes back and forth, like a tide going in and out. The pigments themselves are slightly smudged in some parts, creating a sense of atmospheric haze or softness. The nature of these pigments makes the piece feel elemental—tethered to the materials and tangible reality of our earth, but I think this piece also feels ethereal and transcendent, it captures a wildness that seems beyond human explanation. Perhaps we will see something divine in the swirling and dancing of the vivid blues and the cleanness of blank space in the background.

To help us engage with this image, let’s turn to Matthew 14.

Starting in verse 22, Jesus instructed the disciples to get into a boat and sail to the other side of the lake while he went up a mountain to pray and be alone. However, as the boat gets further and further away from land, a storm begins to brew, and waves are starting to rise around the disciples. In the early hours of the morning, after this had been going on for quite a while, Jesus came to the disciples, walking on the water out to where they were floating. At first, they thought he was a ghost, but as Jesus gets closer, they start to call out to him. Jesus called back to them, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

Our text tells us that Peter responds, “Lord, if it’s you...tell me to come to you on the water.” Jesus offers the invitation, and Peter exits the boat. Like Jesus, he begins to walk on water, but when he catches sight of the wind, his feet begin

to sink. When he cries out, Jesus extends his hand, catching him before he could sink any further. When Peter is safe, Jesus asks, “You of little faith...why did you doubt?” We don’t get an answer from Peter at this moment, although some of the onlookers in the boat proclaimed, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Sometimes, this passage is used to critique Peter, and to point out the way in which he “failed” to trust in Jesus’s power and presence. Peter is held up as this disciple whose lack of belief leads to his lack of safety, but I don’t necessarily believe that this is a fair way to look at this story. Yes, Peter doubted. Yes, he felt the wind and became afraid. Yes, he began to sink. But Peter is only human. And he is a human who has never before walked on water. He is a human who has never witnessed this kind of miracle before. This was all unfamiliar to him. He probably didn’t even have a way to fully understand what was happening—he had no imagination for what would happen if he got out of the boat and began to tread upon the waves. His brain couldn’t grasp this new reality. He didn’t know that he would be part of a miracle.

I’m not trying to make excuses for Peter, but I hope we can have some compassion for him. I also hope we can extend that compassion to ourselves, as we navigate our own uncertain circumstances and the anxiety-producing terrain of our constantly changing culture. Perhaps you are stepping out into a new venture. Perhaps you are preparing for a leap of faith that makes your heart race just a little bit. Perhaps there is something that Jesus is inviting you to that feels scary, and your mind is struggling to understand it. That doesn’t mean that you don’t have faith—it means you’re human. So perhaps now is the time to reflect on this passage and enter into the fears of our own hearts. This time of reflection could be a time to explore those feelings. This could be the time to listen for Jesus’ voice. This might be the way that Jesus is extending his hand to you. Perhaps we might find a new sense of imagination for what God is calling us into—whether that is the blank spaces of our own lives, or the waves of something unfamiliar. Perhaps we will find some of those invitations in this piece of art. Perhaps we will find that we too are part of something miraculous.

So, my friends, for a final time, let us enter into Visio Divina.

To prepare, let me frame our practice. In just a few moments, I will invite us into sacred silence and for about 5 minutes, we will engage with this painting and this story. As you entered this morning, you might have received a piece of paper with the four stages of Visio Divina, but I will also describe them for you now.

First, I invite you to Gaze at the artwork on the screen. Look slowly and thoroughly, taking a first glance, noting the colors, movement, textures, or other aspects of this image. This is simply a preliminary step, as you allow your soul to open and interact with the image.

Second, when you are ready, you can enter a time of Reflection. This is a deeper look, meant to engage your imagination. How does this image inform or illuminate your relationship with God? How does it speak to your spiritual journey?

Third, when you've had a chance to reflect, you can start to Respond with prayer. Did the image remind you of an experience, person or issue for which you'd like to offer thanksgiving or intercession? Did it open a new awareness, or spark a conviction? Offer that prayer to God.

And finally, the last step is to Rest. Sit with the painting again. Notice how God's presence is with you in this space of relaxation and refreshment. How will you take this sense of peace into the rest of your day?

Remember: Gaze, Reflect, Respond, and Rest. Or simply take these moments to breathe deep before the busy week ahead. It's up to you.

Now, settle into your chair, take a second to push away any distractions, and focus on this encounter. I will set my timer, you may begin.

silence

Thank you, my friends. I hope this final practice of Visio Divina has spoken to you and offered you the wisdom you need to continue your fath journey.

May you be like Peter today, feeling empowered to move in the direction that God is calling you. And may your movement forward be filled with courage and miracles.

Amen.