

The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli
Christ Church + Washington Parish
Advent 2: Luke 3: 1-6, Philippians 1:3-11
December 9, 2018¹

One of the best books I read this past year was *Tiny Beautiful Things* by Cheryl Strayed. She is the author of the popular memoir and later Reese Witherspoon movie, *Wild*, where she goes on this journey of self-discovery as she hikes the Pacific Crest Trail. *Tiny Beautiful Things* is her other book that came out the same year as *Wild*, and it is a collection of her advice columns that she wrote for an online magazine. Her understanding of the beauty and suffering of life and their entanglement, along with her irreverence and brutal honesty, make it a compelling read. One of her themes throughout is the general mystery of becoming - that you don't know what something will turn out to be until you've lived it. In one letter, a reader questions her directly to give an example from her own life. In her response she tells this story.

She was eighteen driving down a country road with her mother during the first summer after college. Three years later she'd be scattering her mother's ashes. But on this day, they were just driving through the country idly when they saw a yard sale on the side of the road. No one was outside; the woman whose sale it was didn't even come out of the house; she just waved to them by the window. It was all the normal wares of a yard sale - old cooking pots, worn-out board games, incomplete set of dishes, and then a flash of red caught her eye. A red velvet dress trimmed with white lace, fit for a toddler. "Look at this" she pointed out to her mother, "oh isn't that the sweetest," her mother said, and Cheryl put the dress down. Yet she couldn't stop thinking about the dress and she poked around the other wares. She inexplicably wanted it.

¹When I deliver a sermon, I do not read from the text, so this text matches the audio only in substance.

Though she knew she never wanted children - “children are cute, but ultimately annoying.” Her 18 year old self said. But she kept coming back to the dress, smoothing her hands over the velvet.

You want that dress? Her mother asked.

Why would I? She snapped back

“For someday” her mother said.

“But I’m not even going to have kids.”

“You can put it in a box; then you’ll have it no matter what you do.”

“I don’t have a dollar,” she said with finality

“I do,” her mother said and bought the dress.

She put it in her mother’s cedar box after her death along with other items of her mother’s and carried that box around with her through the roller coaster of her twenties and into her thirties as she dealt with the struggles of being a virtual orphan in the world. In her late thirties after her daughter’s birth, she opened it up and searched through it til she laid her hands on the red velvet and pulled it out of the box.

“My mother bought a dress for the granddaughter she’ll never know.”

“My mother bought a dress for the granddaughter she’ll never know²

² Strayed, Cheryl. Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on love and life from Dear Sugar. p.320-323. A little creative license was taken in the following two paragraphs.

Out of the grief of the past came this gift into the present that would carry them all into the future. Out of the grief of the past came this reminder of absence and presence that would tie them all together into the future. This transcendent moment of the interweaving of time where life – the past, present, and future – good and bad – fit together.

And then, from her crib in the next room, her daughter cried.

Next week the gospel passage will pick up where this one stops and it will be John the Baptist's cry in the wilderness that yanks us out of the transcendent moment unveiled by Luke – the one in this gospel passage. This moment where the past passes a gift to the present that will carry us into the future. A moment of clarity that we see that what God has done weaves together with what God is doing and will do. This moment where the struggle and loss of the past is being redeemed in the present and future of God's work. It's a moment – a brief six verses which is longer than most moments in our life where we see the flash of it all coming together; most of the time, in Scripture, and in our own lives, we are called to have faith that God is moving amidst it all, and that no matter what happens, in the words of Paul in Philippians today, God who has begun a good work in you will bring it to completion. God who has begun a good work in us will bring it to completion. God who has begun a good work in creation will bring it to completion. No matter what happens.

It was the 15th year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate was governor, Herod ruler of Galilee, Annas and Caiaphas the high priests, - names of people in power that brought to mind corruption, fear, oppression, and a fair amount of eye-rolling about hypocrisy in their own time.

John the Baptist shows up and his preaching brings to mind the words of the great prophet Isaiah 700 years earlier, who spoke words of comfort and challenge to his own people amidst their struggles. Words that promised that one day God would make his salvation known to all people. Words from the past, into the present, that tell of the future of God's work among God's people – a future unveiled in Jesus. This is the moment to hold up the metaphorical red dress and say, it's all coming together. The years of struggle and longing of God's people described in detail in the Hebrew Scriptures, God is bringing out of it connection, healing, and wholeness. The mystery of humanity becoming God's people and God becoming our God, unveiled.

Six verses and it's over. Next week we are going to struggle with John the Baptist. Jesus neither gets a smooth path nor leaves us one. The moment of mystic clarity that weaves together what God has done, is doing, and will do, doesn't change everything. Every valley isn't filled, every mountain not made low, the crooked not straight, all have not seen the salvation of God. The past, the present, the future is still being woven together. God isn't done with us yet.

The moment of clarity doesn't change everything, but the faith it tugs forth does. The faith that God will not abandon the good work he began among us centuries ago can carry us through. The faith that God would not give us a gift or call or a passion and not weave it into a blessing for creation can carry us through. The faith that God doesn't abandon what God starts – that nothing will be lost of the goodness in creation – even when someone dies, even when a dream dies, a door closes, a home crumbles – faith that God will bring the good out of it and weave it into the present and the future of what God is doing – that can carry us through a lot. Even when seeing it be so evades us. Even when seeing it be so lasts just a moment.

One of the themes of the season of Advent is the 2nd coming of Christ – when Christ will return and usher in God’s kingdom. It is a belief that we mention rather frequently in our liturgical prayers but little elsewhere partly because we don’t really know much about it beyond that what the first century Christians thought about it – that it was going to happen soon – was clearly wrong. Now I don’t intend to talk much about it now, except to say this, that looking towards the 2nd coming, trusting the 2nd coming, is keeping kindled in us this belief that God isn’t done with us yet. That God is still working in and among us and will continue to do so until the day when all will experience the grace and love - the salvation - of God.

Cheryl is not a religious writer, but I find the end of her piece particularly relevant in this Advent season “. . . We cannot possibly know what will manifest in our lives. We live and have experiences and leave people we love and get left by them. People we thought would be with us forever aren’t and people we didn’t know would come into our lives do. Our work here is to keep faith with that, to put it in a box and wait. To trust that someday we will know what it means, so that when the ordinary miraculous is revealed to us we will be there, standing before the baby girl in the pretty dress, grateful for the smallest things.”³

³ Strayed, Cheryl. *Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on love and life from Dear Sugar*. p.323.