

Detroit

Isaiah 58:9-12; Hebrews 12:26-28

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With reverence and awe -- Hebrews 12:28

From 1932 to 1933, during perhaps the worst period of the Great Depression, Diego Rivera worked 15-hour days and lost nearly 100 pounds painting the mural partly featured on our bulletin cover. This piece, which is just one small section of a giant work consisting of 27 frescoed panels, adorns the walls of the Rivera Court at the Detroit Institute of Arts. When you go home today, look it up on Google Images. "The Detroit Industry Murals." Or better yet, book a flight out to Detroit tomorrow! For it's a magnificent sight to behold, especially in person, where when standing in the center, you're enveloped in this masterpiece all around you.

Our docent called it: "A testimony to the harmonies fluctuating between man, nature, and machine." And if you were looking at the whole work in total, and not just this small panel on our cover, I think you would get that. She continued, that "through his fascination with industry and the workers who power the process of industry, Rivera's series of murals, taken as a whole, expresses that all actions and ideas are one." All actions and ideas are one. So with reverence and awe, I tried to take it all in.

Diego Rivera arrived in Detroit in 1932, just days after a rather infamous Hunger March, where nearly 6,000 unemployed workers (there was 1 unemployed for every 4 at that time) walked on the Ford Motor Company. There was unrest and violence that day resulting in five deaths. Rivera, newly in audience to this, was both taken back and inspired – a city known for its ingenuity and influence was close to slipping into degradation and ruin, but it also had this energy that seemed unwilling to just accept that fate -- and so against this backdrop, with both reverence and awe, he began his work.

On one panel, the one featured on our bulletin, there is a Christ-like figure. If you're not already, please look at it with me. Our docent said of it and I paraphrase: "It represents Christ as The Lamb of God. A doctor plays the role of Joseph, and a nurse that of Mary, and together they are vaccinating their child, or God as it were. In the background three scientists, perhaps like the Biblical Magi, are engaged in what appears to be a research experiment. It's as if Rivera was saying that just as God created Man, Man was now engaged in engineering God..."

"At the mural's unveiling, this panel so offended some members of the Detroit religious community that they said it was blasphemous and demanded that it be destroyed, but, you know what happened instead?" she asked me. "Our attendance went up, people couldn't wait to see it, and here it remains untouched to this day. Isn't that wonderful and ironic?"

Now personally, I wondered if Rivera was also speaking to the Grand Process of Creation and Evolution. The Divine Industry if you will. That, while we might toil and argue away about this or that, God is yet speaking and creating in the background, in a panel, ever incarnate even in the modern, scientific age so removed from the Biblical context.

Such that Christ then is also never stuck in time, imprisoned to scripture or trapped in Heaven under a halo, but beyond time; here, now, born again for each generation.

For just as Rivera depicted, I believe even in our worst days of darkness and depression and unrest, there is yet creative, redemptive power working among us. That even when things in our lives go haywire, and are about to turn us upside down into ruin, God is yet present offering us the good and everlasting vaccination of hope.

And isn't that incredible and worthy of our reverence and awe? That no matter where find ourselves, or better yet, no matter what we've done or have left undone, no matter the hurt or ruin we have created in others or ourselves, God is still there in the center of it all. Taking one in the arm so that in the end we might be shielded, restored, and renewed.

Remember, we get the vaccine... not just for us, but for others too.

Isaiah writes in our Old Testament text today: "The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in."

Contrary to all of its stereotypes, Detroit is actually a pretty neat city. What we've been told, and what I was expecting, was not at all what we were greeted by. The riverfront is beautiful, the water off of the great lakes is so clear and blue that our kids thought it was treated with artificial coloring. The people are friendly, the architecture downtown I thought is stunning, and it is easy to get in, and around, and about. For a city that was left for dead by all reports and accounts, we saw life. A people unshaken by hearsay and their recent difficulties. Ancient ruins if you will that are in the process of being rebuilt.

In one such place and neighborhood, where there were literal ruins of abandoned homes and leveled buildings, there was also right down the street a garden. And not just any garden, but a watered garden, a spring of water, two square **miles** in size. I'm not exaggerating! Dubbed "America's first sustainable urban Agrihood" this volunteer-lead and volunteer-controlled initiative, grows and provides produce to 2,000 local households and nearby communities. What was once a blight, another sore sight to the eyes, has now become a prophetic restored street, a colorful array of sustenance and a vibrant symbol of providence. Google image that too when you go home. "Detroit Agrihood." It's incredible.

And you know what else is incredible but doesn't have a google image? Our young people. Our youth group. For when we got home from our mission trip, I had an email waiting in my inbox from one of the volunteer organizers named Amar. A Muslim woman, Amar wrote:

“Brian, your team was awesome. They gave me a new impression of what a Christian might look like. They worked hard, without question or complaint, and during your time with us you packed 14,801 pounds of food, equivalent to 11,265 meals to our neighbors. Words cannot thank you enough for your team’s efforts. Thank you for volunteering with Gleaners. We hope to see you again in the near future. Peace and blessings, Amar.”

“If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,” the prophet writes, “then light shall rise in the darkness and gloom will be like the noonday.”

Who here remembers reading Charles Dickens and his *A Tale of Two Cities* in High School? Maybe you read it before or after, and if so perhaps you also remember some of the major plots and themes. But in case you don’t, or never have, let me provide you with a brief spark notes version, literally copied from Spark Notes itself:

“With *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens asserts his belief in the possibility of resurrection and transformation, both on a personal and societal level. By delivering himself to the guillotine, Sydney Carton ascends to the plane of heroism, becoming a Christ-like figure; and, that like Christ, he will be resurrected—reborn in the hearts of those he has died to save. Likewise, Dickens’ implies that the death of the old regime in France prepares the way for a beautiful and renewed Paris. So although the novel dedicates a lot of time to describing the atrocities committed by the aristocracy and outraged peasants, it ultimately expresses the belief that violence will give way to a new and better society.”

Now I don’t think for a moment that Dickens had Detroit or Rivera secretly in mind when talking about Paris or old Sydney, nor do I think Dickens was necessarily trying to be prophetic injecting his rather scriptural message into today’s context and world. But boy, does it work and play on those parallels! For in this broken and fearful world where the days today seem darkest, where there are dried lakes out west and shallow river beds towards the east, where there are hunger marches and labor protests, abandoned factories and empty crop fields, where there are wars and genocide, depression and exhaustion, corruption and inflation, murders, violence, racism, sexism, and 10-year old rape victims being forced to carry to term...

Amidst all of this incredible ugliness and degradation, somehow, mercifully, and just as incredibly we are told that God has remained with us, unshaken, in the panel of our sinful lives. And every day, God is out there trying to administer us with hope, so that we can believe that one day there will be a new creation, and that together we will see a new heaven-like city where light defeats night, where love conquers hate, where no one goes to the streets hungry and afraid.

For all actions and ideas are, after all, leading to one: that even in the finality of death and ruin, God can yet make a beginning and breathe new life once again.

With reverence and awe, thanks be to God.

Amen.