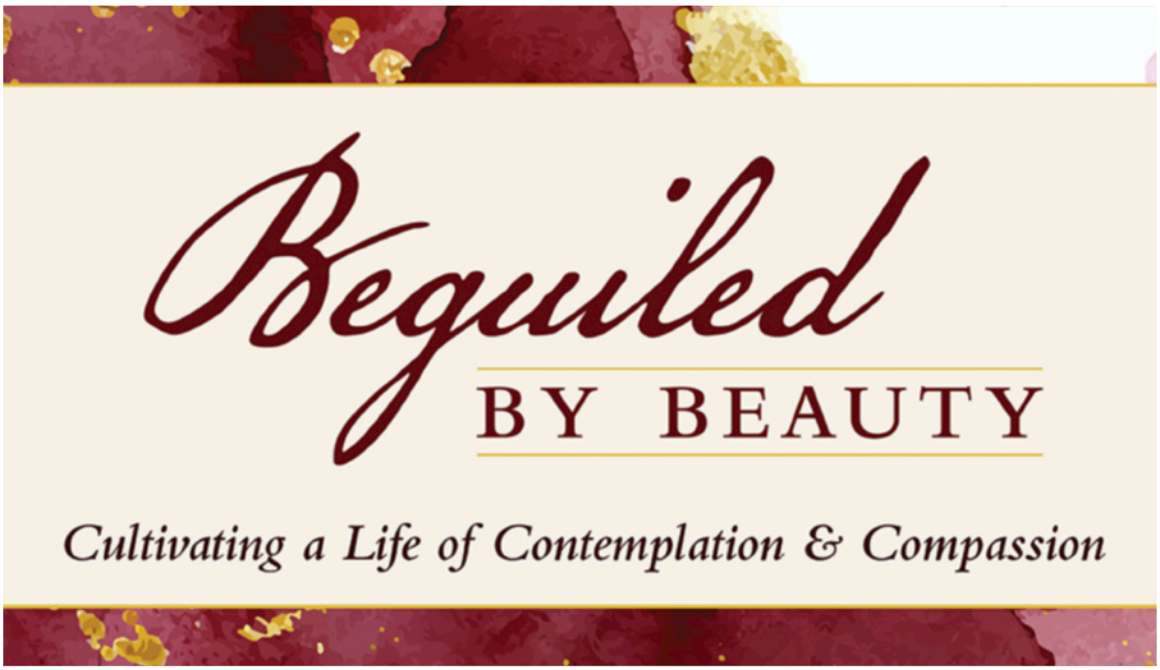

Beguiled by Beauty

One thing I ask of you, [Divine Goodness],
one thing I seek:
that I may dwell in your house all the days of my life,
to gaze on your beauty
and to meditate in your Temple.
— Psalm 27:4 (Inclusive Bible)

An early 6th century theologian described God as "beguiled by beauty." The Creator was lured by a longing for beauty and so set in motion a world of immense diversity and goodness. We were made for this Divine Goodness. We were made inherently worthy, not by our "doing," but by our simply being. All things are beautiful–not by a standard of "pretty" as seen by our eyes, but by an essence of sacred worth that is sensed by the spirit. This is the root and heart of compassion and justice. Practices of contemplation help us train our gaze to these deeper truths. In this worship series we will dwell with the God of Divine Goodness who is deeply in love with us. We will practice ways to return that love as we fall more deeply in love with creation and with one another.

All quoted fragments in the synopses are from Dr. Wendy Farley's book, Beguiled by Beauty.

All scripture translations are from the Inclusive Bible.

Week One – Beauty, Contemplation, and Radical Compassion

Look to Assyria, once a Lebanon cedar
beautiful branches, dense shade,
towering height; its top among the clouds.
Springs nourished it,
and deep waters made it grow tall;
their streams flowed around its base,
sending their channels to all the trees in the countryside...
It was majestic in its beauty with its spreading boughs,
its roots reaching deeply into an abundance of water.

— Ezekiel 31: 3-7 (Inclusive Bible)

All things are beautiful–not by a standard of "pretty" as seen by our eyes, but by an essence of sacred worth that is sensed by the spirit. This is the root and heart of compassion and justice. Beauty is the threshold to Divine Goodness and a door into radical compassion. "The difficulty and crisis of the world is overwhelming. It is virtually impossible to bear it without very deep resources. A life of prayer does not take us out of life but deeper into it." We pursue a contemplative life to intensify spiritual capacities so that we might live as Beloveds of God who extend Goodness in the world.

Week Two – We Are Made for the Beloved

I praise YHWH, who guides me;
even at night my heart teaches me.
I'm always aware of your presence;
you are right by my side,

and nothing can shake me…
You show me the path to Life;
your presence fills me with joy.
Beautiful things are always in your right hand.

— Psalm 16: 7-11 (Inclusive Bible)

A Christian mystic of the 14th century, Julian of Norwich, lived during one of the worst centuries of human history, including the black death pandemic that wiped out millions of people, famines, floods, war, and corruption. In her writing, she address what she believed to be at the root of suffering–the misplaced idea of God's rejection. Suffering is part of being human, but what makes suffering so soul-destroying is our forgetfulness that God is with us. Without this core belief in beauty and sacred worth, we engage in self-and-other-destroying behaviors, inducing further suffering. Contemplative practices invite us into union with the Divine One, healing the wounds of forgetfulness.

Week Three – Awakening to Beauty, Falling in Love with the World

How good it is to praise our God!
It is a pleasure to make beautiful praise!
YHWH rebuilds Jerusalem,
and gathers Israel's exiles.
God heals the brokenhearted,
and binds up their wounds.

— Psalm 147: 1-11 (Inclusive Bible)

We try to satisfy our thirst for meaningful life with so many distractions and addictions. Awakening to beauty is to find the well that never runs dry. For it is in beginning to truly see the world with our spirits that our soul's thirst is quenched. "The resilience and beauty of the natural world is a sign of hope, even when things are difficult." A tree is scorched by fire and yet new sprouts shoot up, defiant and optimistically reaching toward the sun. A crack in a sidewalk reveals the seeds just beneath the surface just waiting for a chance to break through. "Divine beauty shimmers and shimmies

through the universe and in every barrio where someone is singing or weeping. Because of beauty, our spirits are enlivened." Contemplating this resilient beauty draws us back to our own vitality and the promise that we, too, are capable of new life.

Week Four – Abyss, Mystery, and Wonder

Alleluia! Praise the Name of YHWH—
sing praise, you who serve the Most High,
who stand in the house of YHWH,
in the courts of God's house!
Alleluia! God is good!
Sing praises to God's name because it is beautiful!

— Psalm 135: 1-3; 13-21 (Inclusive Bible)

The spiritual part of ourselves is a "divine abyss." It is a dimension that is not touched by words, thoughts, ideas and feelings. Our bodies were made for perceiving the beauty of the world–a flower, a kiss, a stunning and vibrant green hillside, a newborn baby. And yet all the art in the world cannot capture exactly what it feels like to experience the Divine nature of these things. The path of unknowing is to both savor what the senses can take in but also wonder at the mystery of unfathomable depths of even a single atom. For those living a contemplative life, this is a "sweetness of longing and of tasting in which one ceases to praise and becomes pure praise, an unending chant to the divine goodness."

Week Five – The Beauty of a World Without a "Why"

Look at you—so beautiful, my dearest!
Look at you—so beautiful!

— Song of Songs 4: 1-7 (Inclusive Bible)

The beauty in other beings exists completely for itself–not for any reason other than that the joy of existence is the purpose of life. When we accept this non- utilitarian goodness, we tune into the raw delight in the world.

“Beauty decenters our ego by helping us realize that life is its own justification.” As we let go of how everything relates to us, serves us, benefits us, we begin to appreciate all things for their own worth and beauty, and our desire for their flourishing intensifies. When we turn this idea onto our own selves, we can let go of the expectations of others and the societal standards of beauty in regard to our own worth.

Week Six – From Beauty to Compassion and Justice

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of one who brings good news—
who announces peace,
and brings news of happy things,
and proclaims deliverance,
saying to Zion, “Your God reigns!”

— Isaiah 52: 7-10 (Inclusive Bible)

Our series ends with a reaffirmation of our call to contemplative action in the world. The awareness of one another’s beauty is the “seedling for the birth of compassion and justice. The celebration of this beauty of beings, their communities and ecosystems, cannot exist without mourning assaults on them.” A contemplative life can empty us and ready us to become instruments of the Good. We will affirm our plans to continue practicing “a way of beauty” that makes life “rich, courageous, generous, and joyful.”