

Creation

(#7 in the “*Thin Places*” Epiphany series,
#1 in the “*Masterpieces*” Lenten series)

*While he was praying, the appearance of his face changed . . .
Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking with him.
They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure,
which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.*
(Luke 9:29-31)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on Epiphany Sunday, **March 3, 2019**
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I'm excited this morning to offer a message intended to straddle two liturgical seasons. Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday of Epiphany which began on January 6. During Epiphany, which began with the feeble light of the star the magi followed to Bethlehem, we've witnessed the light grow, arriving at last today to witness the shining of the glory of Jesus on the Mountain of Transfiguration.

Three days from now, Ash Wednesday, we reverse course to reenter the darkness, plodding through the forty days of Lent toward Easter. Our text from Luke balances these two things, Epiphany and Lent. While on the mountain in the light of his glory (Epiphany), Moses and Elijah with Jesus speak of his departure in Jerusalem, his crucifixion (Lent).

Today's message will both end the *Thin Place* Epiphany series and launch the *Masterpieces* Lenten series, which will highlight each Sunday one of the *Masterpieces* of Michelangelo. Today I'm calling upon a single sermon to do double duty. I've never done that before, but it just seemed to make sense as a way to come at our text, the Transfiguration mountain of glory prior to plunging into the valley of humiliation.

To begin the *Masterpieces* series, I think that we can see this dual theme as on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, where Michelangelo painted Genesis themes, the glory of creation followed by expulsion from the paradise.

Having been to Rome on several occasions and going back there with several of you in addition to Florence and Assisi and Venice in summer of 2020 as a part of our Oberammergau Passion Play experience, I'm excited for this Lenten opportunity to focus on Michelangelo's *Masterpieces*. We actually tip-toed into this territory last Sunday with Michelangelo's *Pieta*, completed in 1499 at the age of 24. By the way, this Wednesday (Ash Wednesday) happens to be Michelangelo's birthday. Born on March 6 in 1475, it will be his 544th birthday.

In thinking of the one Masterpiece that could gather these dual themes of Epiphany and Lent, mountain and valley, I began to think about the posture of the disciples in the Transfiguration

story. They were looking up, astounded. So, I wondered, for what Michelangelo *Masterpiece* do we look up?

That's easy. The Sistine Chapel. Those of you who have been there know what I mean when I say that the crowds all look up (which is why pickpockets find it to be a great place to work!). We are looking up at the famous ceiling Michelangelo finished in 1512, a dozen years after the *Pieta*. The focal point our eyes feast upon is, no doubt, *The Creation of Adam*.

The Sistine Chapel sits at the northeast corner of St. Peter's Basilica, a brick box of a building with a completely unimpressive exterior. Built in 1483 by Pope Sixtus, its dour exterior doesn't hint at the key role the chapel has played in the pomp and ceremony of the papal court. Serving first and foremost as the pope's private place of worship, we know it best as the place where the conclave of cardinals meet in order to elect a new pope. We may say it's the Roman Catholic answer to Solomon's Temple, its odd proportions – 134 feet long, 44 feet wide, and 68 feet high -- meant to replicate the dimensions of Solomon's temple.

From its earliest days its interior walls on the long sides, north and south, were covered with frescoes balancing our Judeo-Christian story. The Sistine Chapel, like this sermon, straddles two themes. On the southern wall are scenes from Moses' life such as crossing the Red Sea and receiving the tablets of the Law at Mt. Sinai. On the northern wall are scenes from the life of Christ such as his baptism, his temptation, and the Last Supper.

The ceiling, though, through the Sistine Chapel's first 30 years, retained the chapel's original austerity, 5800 square feet of blue sky speckled with golden stars. In other words, if you had been in the Sistine Chapel prior to Michelangelo and looked up, it would be as if you were looking up into heaven, as though the ceiling were not there at all, as if you were in the immediate presence of God, in a *Thin Place* where heaven is experienced on earth.

When Pope Julius II was elected in 1503, however -- the Sistine Chapel still only 20 years old -- he sought out the newest and most promising artistic talent in Rome, Michelangelo, for a commission to paint the ceiling with the twelve apostles. The *Pieta* was only four years old, and Michelangelo was stepping into that fame. In truth though, it was the last thing Michelangelo wanted to do. He was a sculptor, not a painter. Some say his enemies, jealous of his gifts, were using their influence with the pope to lead him to Michelangelo, setting him up for failure in a medium of art with which he was unfamiliar. Michelangelo asked the pope for liberty to accomplish something much grander than the pope's original idea of the apostles and his request was granted. He wrote to his father in Florence that the pope had given him liberty to "*do whatever I wanted.*"

But he was a sculptor, not a painter. With marble, he was fully confident. As a painter, not so much. Yet, once commissioned, he was determined to turn the task into something worthy of his genius, giving himself heart and soul to the project, so to offer a work that would astonish the world throughout these 500 years.

If the south wall depicted the Hebrew people under Moses' law and the north wall depicted the church under the grace of Jesus, Michelangelo's ceiling would not move forward to the apostles

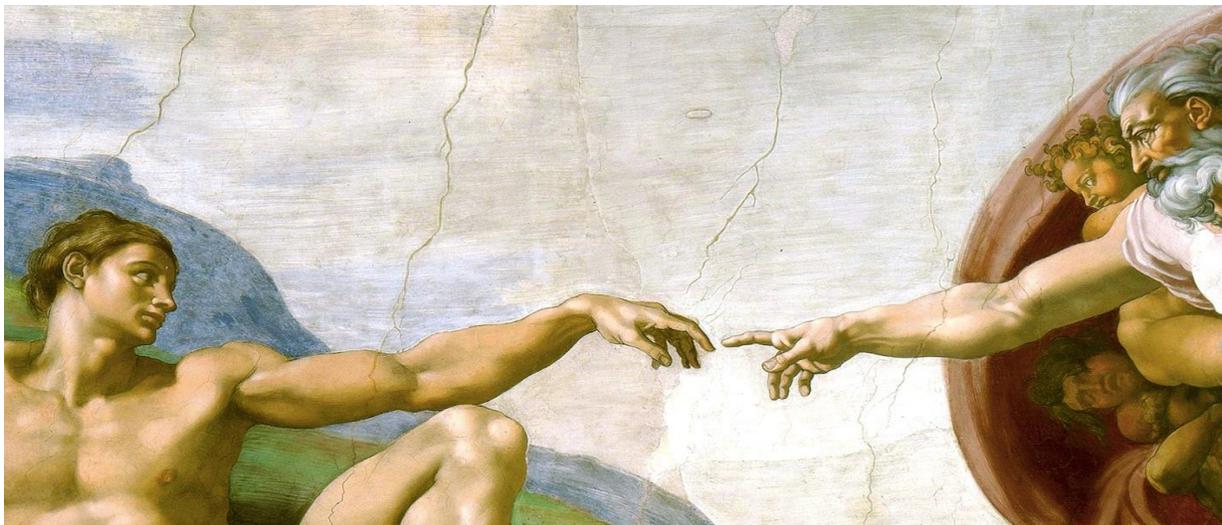
as the pope had envisioned, but backwards, to our human beginnings. He chose Genesis as his source, God's relationship to his creatures prior to the Law.

In a flow of nine architectural divisions, Michelangelo's paintings run the chapel's length, thematically grouped into three triads, so that the entire sequence is deeply Trinitarian. If I may confess my mystic side (you know I love 3s – whether in art, or in baseball, which is art with its 3-3-3 dance through nine innings), thinking of that ceiling I delight that this is the 33rd sermon of my second year as your Senior Pastor and offered on the third day of the third month!

On that ceiling Michelangelo offers images of mankind in his most visceral state, a fast paced, vertiginous journey, a cyclone of primal energy created by an artist of titanic talent and consuming ambition. With this Masterpiece, the one known as a philosopher of marble now shows himself a rhapsodist in pigment, a conjurer of celestial visions, so that even now, 500 years later, millions visit and look up.

Imagine how Michelangelo had to look up. It wasn't easy. Painting a vault 60 feet above the floor posed challenges. His scaffolding offered usually enough room to stand, but his back and neck ached and his eyes were often enflamed. In the midst of the project he wrote to his father back in Florence, "*I am not in a good place, and I am not a painter.*" He felt his true talents were being wasted by the Pope's commission, signing official updates to the pope, "*Your Michelangelo, sculptor in Rome,*" as something of a reminder that he should be about more important work. Yet, unwilling to give his rivals the satisfaction of witnessing his failure, he determined that his greatest challenge would be his greatest triumph.

The full ceiling was dedicated on October 31, 1512. This was All Saint's Eve, five years to the day before a monk named Martin Luther would shake Rome and change the world, launching the Protestant Reformation.



Now let's look closer at the bulletin image of the *Creation of Adam*. It revels in man's limitless potential, a celebration of Adam's uncorrupted beauty at Creation. Thrusting his hand toward Adam's, God's urgent purpose is matched by Adam's tentative, not yet fully aware, yet somehow yearning, reach.

Notice the narrow gap between the extended index fingers of Adam and God. Ah, and there it is, our *Thin Place* to close out the *Thin Place* series of sermons. Here we find heaven and earth in proximity, each felt by the other. The last *Thin Place* in our series is humanity's first *Thin Place*!

It's easy to imagine this gap crackling with invisible charges, animating sparks of the divine. The image of the near-touching fingers of God and Adam has become iconic of humanity. It is claimed that this painting, along with Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, are the two most replicated sacred paintings of all time. Not bad for "*Michelangelo the Sculptor*." Every year some 3,000,000 pilgrims flock to the Vatican in Rome and crane their necks to peer upwards at what has become one of the most famous masterpieces of Western culture.

Michelangelo is exploring a profound theological question: "*What does it mean to be created in the image of God?*" Instead of showing us the moment when God forms Adam's body out of the dust and breathes the breath of life, Michelangelo shows God giving Adam *Something Other* than mere life. Note that Adam is already alive. God is gifting humankind with his own power of creativity. So, Adam reaches with a reciprocal longing for God, not in response to command but in search of an intimacy of connection between the divine and the human.

A *Thin Place*, to be sure. Michelangelo's Masterpiece suggests that *Something More* is compounded within the human molecule, experienced in that *Thin Place* of the gap. When we worship, when we pray, when we engage sacrament, we are being called to imagine Who and Whose we are.

The Gap, the *Thin Place*, declares our closeness to God, but also affirms that we are not God. Were we to look at the entire ceiling, we would see the Gap become a Gulf as Adam falls from light to darkness, expelled from the Garden Paradise through sin.

So here is our *Masterpiece* straddling Epiphany and Lent. We begin with the *Thin Place* Gap between the Creator and the creature, and end with the Gulf of separation from God through sin.

We will discover in Lent that our essential human quest is to become what once we were, before the Fall, before Paradise was Lost. We will ask, what will bridge the Gulf? And, we will discover, as Paul wrote, "*Through Christ God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, by making peace through the blood of the cross.*"

The blood of Christ bridged that Gap, that Gulf. In Holy Communion this morning, as we receive the bread and the wine and sacramentally draw close to God, may we feel once more the animating charge of the divine.