

CHRISTMAS 1, December 29, 2019, Year A

- Ever since high School, I have loved the monumental sculptures and the suspended mobiles of Alexander Calder. During my high school years in the early 1970's, I was in western Massachusetts. I remember traveling south on weekends, and seeing some of his large outdoor sculptures being built at a metal foundry in Connecticut. To me, Calder's work suggested a delight with the world, and a generous sense of the possibility of beauty within it.
- Calder approached the creation of public sculpture in a unique way. His largest pieces are often set in the center of cities, placed on plazas between modern office buildings. We have a beautiful example here in Grand Rapids, with another large one in the same bright red color, nearby in Chicago. Many of Calder's large outdoor "stabile" sculptures provide a lyrical counterpoint to the linear and grid-like facades of the surrounding office buildings.
- We know that monumental sculptures from earlier times often portray honored heroes on horseback or standing. Perhaps the most dramatic and newsworthy examples in our own day are some Civil War legacy moments in the deep South ~ I think of Lee Square in New Orleans, and the Nathan Bedford Forrest monument in Memphis, both recently removed. In these cases, major post-Civil War statuary has been an object of contention because of negative historical associations.
- But, by contrast, Calder's large works are not tethered to historical occasions. Instead, they are abstract, and point to transcendental ideas rather than memorialized national events. They don't simply *draw attention* to *themselves* as objects of regard. Calder's plaza sculptures *do more*. They lead the observer's eyes to notice the interplay between his work and the spaces around them, as well as their contrast with nearby buildings. One doesn't just *view* these sculptures; one *interacts* with them, and with the larger context of their placement.

CHRISTMAS 1, December 29, 2019, Year A

- Here, we must note a paradoxical aspect of *all* public sculpture, which indicates *something more about us* than it does about *the art*. Many people work everyday in buildings around where these sculptures are situated. But they are just as capable of *being as inattentive to these pieces of art as they are to their parking spaces*, or to the doors of their offices. With the soaring heights and reaching curves of his public monuments, Calder's sculptures are expressively shaped and tremendously up-lifting. But our focus on *our work* and *our worries*, and the practical things we need to do, blinds us! And it diverts our attention from something truly beautiful, right there in front of us.
- I note all this because the same thing can happen when we encounter the first verses of John's Gospel. In what is often called the 'prologue' to his Gospel, John has written a passage shaped by *poetic beauty* and filled with *lofty theology*. Yet, we have a tendency to focus on what is immediate and practical, and on what seems narrowly relevant to our everyday concerns. And so, *we can pass by this Gospel 'work of art' just as people hurry past the great Calder downtown, absorbed with getting to their offices*. In both cases, *something sublime lies before us, waiting for us to interact with it*. But sometimes we don't see it because *we aren't* really looking for it!
- Today's Gospel may be one of the hardest texts for a preacher to work with. On many Sundays, the preacher has the challenge of *commenting on a story*, the mode of communication Jesus so often used to share his revelation. As Jesus clearly knew, *stories speak* to us. This leaves the preacher in a precarious position. *Either* follow a lively story with *deadly commentary*, or *compete* with Jesus by telling *another* story, which might obscure or detract from the Lord's narrative. *Today, our Gospel presents us with a remarkable piece of hymn-like poetry, infused with philosophical insight*. Here, the preacher might either diminish John's uplifting poetry by

CHRISTMAS 1, December 29, 2019, Year A

weighted-down analysis, or sound like a news reporter who tells you what a politician really *meant* to say.

- My goal, then, is *not to tell you* what the Prologue to John's Gospel *says*, just as I will *not try to explain* what Calder's stunning *La Grande Vitesse* *means*. In both cases, I can *point to what we see, to what is there for us to notice, and which we might otherwise overlook*. Like buying a postcard from a museum gift-shop to remember a favorite work of art, I hope you will take your Scripture insert home with you today, so that you can return, *again and again*, to the soaring and reaching beauty of this part of John's Gospel.
- "*All things came into being through him...*" Not just great whales and tiny gnats, and every living thing in between. But also noticeable patterns like smiles and other expressions of love, and the observable similarity between the shape of galaxies, storm clouds and the chambered nautilus. The pattern of relationships into which I am born, and in which I mature ~ these are among the things that came into being through him. This helps me see that *the circumstances of my life are connected with the Word, and are among God's intended contexts for my flourishing as a human being*.
- "*What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*" Because "*the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*" To see natural light, our eyes need to be open and functioning, for it is here, all around us. Likewise, to see spiritual light, *the eyes of our hearts and minds need to be open and functioning*, as well. For *Exodus-Shekinah glory*, as well as *Mt. Hermon Transfiguration-light* light, pervade the whole world.
- "*We have seen his glory, ... full of grace and truth.*" We *have* seen, and yet we may *not* see. Though we have a magnificent Calder here in Grand Rapids, it's possible for us to be oblivious to it when we pass through

CHRISTMAS 1, December 29, 2019, Year A

downtown. John proclaims that we have seen the glory of the Word, who was with God at the beginning. *Do we still see this glory? There are some things we need to look at again and again, in order to see them. And, when we do, we discover how they give and give, and give again.* Works of *beauty*, as well as of *truth* and of *what is good*, reflect their source in the Word through whom all things were made. Among all these things, some in particular *give, over and again*. Likewise, among the Scriptures we find words that continue to give and give. But their power to impart grace is linked to their being read and heard.

- This is why we should always have some texts that we *read, over and again*. It's not because we see the spiritual realm through our efforts. Instead, by attending to God's *self-revealing* Word, we perceive the *true* light, which enlightens everyone. For as John tells us, *the Word reveals the Father's heart, and makes him known*.



Alexander Calder, *Le Grande Vitesse*, 1969