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~~DEATH'S UGLINESS AND LIFE'S BEAUTY~~

Is 52-53; Jn 3; Ardis Schleining Funeral; December 30, 2025

As Ardis lay on her deathbed a couple of weeks ago, she did not look much like the pretty, young wife Leon married almost 65 years ago. Disease, injury, and especially age will destroy physical beauty. When someone is suffering, we see it in the lines and tense expressions on their faces. As a pastor, I have been called to where someone has just died. There may be some peacefulness to be seen then, especially after a long, hard struggle against death, but I have never witnessed a beautiful corpse. Death is not pretty.

“Beauty is fleeting.” Maybe you have heard the saying before, but do you know where it comes from? I wasn’t sure, so I looked it up and found the expression is in the Bible, in the last chapter of the Book of Proverbs, which includes a description of what a god-fearing wife and mother is like. The second-last verse says: **“Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised”** (31:30 NIV). There is a sort of beauty that is not short-lived, but lasts forever.

At funerals, photos displays and slide shows from the life of the deceased are made. Looking at them, we can’t help but notice the changes over time, the changes in the one who died and changes in us. Seeing those photos also might remind us of something else we don’t want to think about: one day some of those same photos might be on display at our funerals. Our families and friends will gather and marvel at how we all used to look so young, beautiful or handsome.

The Old Testament Reading I chose for today from Isaiah 52-53 is heard on Good Friday, the day Jesus died on the cross, and not usually on the sixth day of Christmas, today. At Christmas we sing about how Jesus, the holy Infant, was “so tender and mild.” A healthy newborn baby is the image of beauty. Isaiah prophesied how that beautiful baby boy would one day face the ugliness of death on a cross. The ugliness of Jesus’ cross reflects the ugliness of sin and death in this world. At Christmas we rejoice that God sent His Son to live, die, and rise to save us from the ugliness of death, the ugliness of days like December 13, 2025, when Ardis died.

Isaiah wrote about our newborn Lord's future, when the man Jesus was lifted up on the cross and died. Describing Him as if it had already happened, what did Jesus' suffering and death look like?

Many were astonished at You – Jesus' appearance was shocking.

His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance – If you have ever watched Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*, Jesus' scourging in slow motion and His gruesomeness crucifixion are hard to watch, even knowing it was only a movie recreation, but it was real for Jesus. Death can make us almost unrecognizable.

**He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him,
and no beauty that we should desire Him.**

**He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces (won't look at)
He was despised, and we esteemed Him not.**

We are naturally attracted to beauty, success, wealth, power, and popularity. Were any of those things used to describe Jesus on the cross? Beauty? Jesus was a beaten, bloody mess. Success? Jesus looked like a failure. Wealth? They stripped Him of everything He had, gambling for His robe. Power? Jesus seemed powerless; they mocked Him to save Himself by coming down off the cross, but He did not. Popularity? Of the thousands who followed Jesus as His disciples, the only ones who were left at the cross were John, Jesus' mother, and few other women. Who would **desire** a Lord like that?

By all accounts, Ardis was well liked. She was outgoing and active. She was competitive in bowling and liked playing golf and cards. She enjoyed life and liked being with people, and people liked being with her. She will be missed by many, but none of those things kept her from aging, growing weaker, and dying. Ardis, like all of us, needed saving from sin and death; none of us are capable of saving ourselves. That is something only God can do for us in Jesus Christ. Isaiah explained how Jesus was there on the cross to save us.

**But He was pierced for our transgressions;
He was crushed for our iniquities;
upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with His wounds we are healed.**

I was taught that it is not polite to speak ill of the dead, but there is nothing nice to say about death itself. What saves us from our sin and death is faith in Jesus and what He did by suffering and dying for us. Jesus did not die for His sins; He had none that He ever committed. Jesus died for my sins, your sins, and Ardis' sins. This is not me speaking ill of her, you, or even myself, but acknowledging the reality that all of us must admit, if we are going to be saved by faith in Jesus.

It is easy to get busy with work and play and family and friends. That's the sort of life we are used to, and we are mostly okay with that until it comes to a screeching halt. Death is a great reality check that puts the breaks on all that is "normal" in our lives. Whether we want it or not, a Christian funeral service will remind us of our sins and weaknesses, our failures to live up to what God expects of us, even as we grieve the loss of a loved one. When someone dies, his or her soul faces God's judgment. What will God's verdict be based upon? If it's how good and faithful we have been to God and each other, then we are lost and condemned. What hope can we have? Jesus!

Surely He [God's Son] has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.

What God the Father put His Son through was for us and for our salvation. We saw the warning signs that Ardis' life was drawing to a close, but God already knew the number of her days before she was even born. God saw this day coming when you would be here grieving the death of a wife, mother, grandmother, or friend.

Jesus carried your **griefs** to the cross. Jesus carried the **sorrows** of your loss to the point of His death. Jesus was **chastised** and **wounded** for your **transgressions** and **iniquities** so you can have God's **peace** and healing of all that ails you, even death.

I have been told that Ardis loved to go the casino and gamble. What I know about casinos – and it's not very much – is that the odds are stacked in their favor. The odds always favor the house. You need luck to beat those odds, but if you keep playing, the odds will catch up with you, and in the end you will lose.

Is death the “house” winning because the odds, the laws of probability, have caught up with us? Is life a big gamble with a few big winners, and most of us just losers, or is there a “sure thing” bet in this life?

We have a “sure winner” in Jesus Christ. He was dealt the “losing hand” of a sinner’s suffering and death so we could come out winners. The “deck was stacked against” Him as He took all our loser cards and He gave us all His winners. Why would God the Father do that to His own Son? Jesus Himself tells us in John three.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.

Jesus’ resurrection from the dead shows us that we are saved from sin and death. Jesus died for our sins and rose to life to give us life after death, and this is a beautiful thing. Death is ugly, but God has given us life in Christ, which has a beauty that age, sickness, sin and death cannot take from us. Faith in Jesus is the only thing that keeps us from being losers eternally. **“Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ”** (1 Cor. 15:57). Amen.