

Zion National Park: Beauty and Faith  
Initial Statement  
March 2021

When I first started making threadpaintings, I focused on the rural environment in which I had grown up - the relatively flat, green, and tree-bordered pastures of northeast Texas. As I grew more confident in my technical skill and craft in threadpainting, I started searching for new locations to depict – areas near my current home in Dallas and in west Texas. I would set off on short trips with my camera to record ideas for potential works. I quickly realized that it would be useful to have a prolonged visit, if possible, to these places of beauty. The light and seasons robbed the basic geographical features in new outfits hourly. I started searching for ways to stay longer and preferably within these places so I could immerse myself in them. The National Park Service has a variety of artist residencies so artists can engross themselves in these environments for inspiration.<sup>1</sup>

I was very grateful to be selected as an artist-in-residence for Zion. It's a competitive process, with four people chosen from around 100 applications each year for a month-long stay in the park. I decided I wanted to go during February because I hoped that I would experience snow, something that is relatively rare in north Texas. Unexpectedly, my residency was mostly-snow free for me, while back home in Texas millions endured the “Snowmageddon” during the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of February. Despite the lack of snow, Zion was, as many artists and visitors have said before, awe-inspiring, beautiful, and overwhelming.

My husband drove with me to Zion. When we arrived at the park's east entrance, we were both tired and already overdosed on beauty from the views along the highways in northern Arizona and southern Utah. And yet, as we drove on Highway 9 through the park, I felt like a five-year old in a Willy Wonka-sized candy store. Fortunately, my husband was driving, navigating us through the mile long Zion-Mt Carmel tunnel and down the sharp switchbacks into the canyon so I could ogle and gape uninterrupted by the tediousness of making sure the car stayed on the road.

It was narrower and taller than I imagined. There was a greater variety of vegetation than I expected. While I had brought a portion of my thread supply with me for my work, I quickly realized I hadn't brought nearly enough orange or even the right shades of orange. The rocky sandstone near the Checkerboard undulated in waves that seemed very unrock-like. The pines were loftier than I had imagined, and the number of cottonwoods near the Virgin River was staggering. And it was extravagantly beautiful.

Zion in the Bible is described as the city of God, the sanctuary where the people of God dwell with Him. Psalm 50 proclaims, “From Zion, perfect in beauty, God shines forth.” Psalm 48 says, “Great is the Lord, and most worthy of praise, in the city of our God, his holy mountain. Beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth ... is Mount Zion, the city of the Great King. God is in her citadels; he has shown himself to be her fortress.” After spending only a few hours in Zion, most visitors can understand why the Mormon settlers were inspired to call it Zion. It feels like a refuge from the outside world. The Virgin River shelters under the towering cliffs

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/arts/air.htm>

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from the inhospitable desert. The absence of cell service within the canyon added an additional layer of separation from worldliness.

For me the aesthetic experience of nature is one of the great gifts from God. When I am confronted with visual beauty, it is a sucker punch to my senses that produces joy. It is a joy that I must share. When we experience beauty, we are overwhelmed, and then we want to share it with others. “Look and see! The land is beautiful!”

Beauty transcends the material world and connects us to that which is unseen. Philosophers Thomas Aquinas and Jacques Maritain connected beauty to Christ. The properties of Beauty – integrity, harmony, and clarity—are perfectly manifested in Christ, the Word made flesh. My visual joy in nature is a pale echo of the Eucharistic joy. “Taste and see! The Lord is good.”<sup>2</sup>

There were also moments of awe and the sublime. I was aware that the forces of nature - rockfalls, flashfloods, and extreme weather - were present and unpredictable. Composer Oliver Messiaen spoke of the “gift of fear” that the area near Zion creates. “One senses a divine presence, something which is sacred, one is subjugated to this feeling, the gift of fear.”<sup>3</sup> I was reminded of the Christmas story, “And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.”<sup>4</sup>

Many visitors to Zion also connect the beauty they experience to the Divine. Historian Juanita Brooks wrote, “the memory of these natural beauties will be as a fresh breeze across your face, the whole experience something in the nature of baptism. Surely this is not the land which God forgot, but the one He has preserved inviolate to minister to the troubled heart of man.”<sup>5</sup> Lyman Hafen, the executive director of the Zion Natural History Association expressed, “It is among the most glorious places on earth for me... It is a place apart, a place I can come to and feel closer to heaven.”<sup>6</sup>

As the artist-in-residence, I had the privilege and blessing of staying in the heart of Zion National Park at the Grotto. The cabin is near the head of several trails, the most famous being Angel’s Landing. On the weekends, I felt like the entire City of God was going past my front door, on their way to view the wonders of Zion Canyon and the Virgin River.

The workers of the National Park Service as well as Zion’s partner organizations kept the Park and my home at the Grotto orderly, performing the duties of heavenly angels by rescuing distressed hikers, providing answers to their endless questions, and most crucially, maintaining well-ordered parking lots, roads, and trails. They keep Zion safe and well for us to visit when we are in need of respite and time in God’s beautiful environs to restore our souls.

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 34:8

<sup>3</sup> Waite and Neilson. *Zion Canyon Reader*. Pg 215

<sup>4</sup> Luke 2:9

<sup>5</sup> Waite. 206

<sup>6</sup> Waite 223

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Philosopher Roger Scruton wrote “The experience natural beauty is not a sense of ‘how nice!’ or ‘how pleasant!’ It contains a reassurance that this world is a right and fitting place to be—a home in which our human powers and prospects find confirmation.”<sup>7</sup> I will always be grateful that Zion National Park was briefly my home where I found a fountain of inspiration for my work.

Along with joy, I felt sorrow while in Zion. My sadness was from the knowledge that my moments here were so fleeting. I wept sometimes on my hikes because no matter how perfect the vision before me, it was only a brief, incomplete, and very shadowed glimpse of the Divine.

One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek:  
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,  
to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.<sup>8</sup>

Threadpainting, as a medium, echoes the strength and fragility of the earth. Both fabric and our environment are made of stuff that is meant to bring comfort to us. Cloth covers in warmth while the land brings sustenance. Both are durable. Cloth and fabric can last through many wears and washes, and the land endures many of the hardships. And yet, both cloth and land are fragile and easily bear the imprint of our presence. The cloth I use in my work easily stains, and Zion is easily tarnished by visitor misuse. Both are fleeting and will pass away, like all things except faith, hope, and love.<sup>9</sup> Though made with perishable materials, I hope my work gives glimpses of the beauty and joy I find in Zion and throughout our world.

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<sup>7</sup> Scruton, Roger. *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction*. 55

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 27:4

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:13