

With this essay by [Jon Delmas Wood](#) the Institute continues a new series begun in September 2016 that will appear monthly (the second Wednesday of the month), with contributions from members of the [Company of Teachers](#) designed to relate the Reformed tradition to current events. Feel free to reproduce and circulate these pieces as you see fit.

Seeing Things Anew

By Jon Delmas Wood

April 2017

Spring brings break and often travel. It changes things. Maybe it's the special tint of Easter, but March and April trips to loved ones render opportunity to see the world anew. In any case, it's likely always true that we will need to see things differently back home. During recent travels, I found myself confronting grace in just that way.

It all came rather literally "to view." From the moment of arrival, I noticed screens everywhere. In the airport, of course, but then also in the living room there gleamed a steady flicker of the neo-hearth. In the takeout line for barbecue, I queued up in a crossfire of flatscreens. In the waiting room of a doctor's office, a beam of episodes promised transformation for dumpy home-owners. At a restaurant, every table featured portals to assist with orders, complete with their rotisserie of ads and games. People at all places sat and stood and walked and drove agog with their devices that would seem in turn to make the rest superfluous. Perhaps this is just as true in my erstwhile everyday; I only noticed there amidst the journey.

Everywhere seemed ablaze in sound and light. It was as if some Faustus had acted upon a dream of heaven. Think of it like this: imagine something vast and beautiful. Perhaps an ocean. In trying to understand it, you may make comparisons. The blue is like a sapphire. The gem is like a gleaming sky. The sky is like stained glass in some place of great reverence. And so on to a practical infinity of more and more comparisons. Then perhaps the thought arises that all of these things are deeply true and that all the likenesses are present already in the momentary perception. To appreciate the spectrum of analogies together in any one perception is to see each aspect and the thing itself more fully. It is a classic one-and-many line of thinking. After all that, our Faustus concludes that the whole package of fullness-in-finitude is in turn an analogy of paradise, where the infinite depths of God are all together at once in perfect fellowship. Then Faustus, being Faustus, tries to harness the insight to self-service. Cue the magic. Let us by all means re-create the glitter of infinity in space! Stuff it with every fleck of light and wave of sound. Is there any gap? Faustus packs with ever-greater urgency the interstices of our senses. "This is the temple of the Lord. The temple of the Lord. The temple of the Lord." Titillation reigns. It is a great catena, that is, chain, of entertainment.

It squeezes out the breathing room of story. This is especially true of sacred story, which would subvert by dint of Sabbath, or of sound of sheer silence, or of Holy Saturday. The pause is the gate of paradise in much the way that Luther described passivity of justification. Without this pause, the moment is a flood, a babble, an attempt to impose infinite meaning with heaps of our own material. To maximally pack each moment, one attempts to seal the tomb from which dramatic resurrection changes everything before and since in ways that you will see as right because it comes amidst a story you are living; and you know this always had to be the way, even though—because—its power reasserts surprise. Such grace requires story. There is no

surprise in an approximated heaven. “Lips that would kiss form prayers to broken stone.” There is only the simulacrum of surprise in the artifice of novelties. I agree completely with Calvin’s assessment of the sinful condition; it is a choking factory of idols.

The irony is painful. Faustus’ approach to paradise arrives at its refined opposite. Perhaps, many years ago, the space of several minutes could have left me bored. Does anyone now sustain more than a second without malaise? Or even a small part of a second? The disquiet gets more acute the more you reduce it; it is the concentrated conflagration of tedium. Maximal titillation aims to preclude the very predicament exacerbated by the process. Where else could you find something so perilously close to the abundance of heaven as is the manifold reality of screens? And yet... malaise remains when we sense that the greatest concentration of light and sound wants still more. We only ever manufacture an asymptote that won’t quite touch the cross or cross the axis. “What hath not man sought out and found, But his dear God? ... Poor man, thou searchest round To find out death, but missest life at hand.” We confront at last the infinitesimal gap rather than the fullness that is always present. The present. The gift. The surprise. Grace.

Here my meditation culminates in Easter after all. In traveling this spring, I witnessed my complicity in something as ostensibly innocuous as ceaseless checking of the headlines and my personal communications. It is prone to idolatry. That awareness is itself a grace. It emerges in a story that defies confines—screen-time or otherwise. The grace of Easter is completely pervasive. It bears fullness freely. By God and not our artifice we see it, feel it, hear it, taste it, know it. It is familiar and surprising without contradiction. Whether departing or returning from our travels, may we all together sense with greater joy the grace of every moment.