

**November 22, 2020**  
**Surprise! Let there be Art!**  
**Exodus 31:1-11**

***A God of Beauty***

In the beginning, according to Genesis 1, what did God do? God created ... everything. Everything good. Everything in glorious, natural systems. Everything exquisitely beautiful.

If God were being efficient, he would have created the world as a simple machine, in which every part has a function and performs its purpose perfectly, like a finely crafted Swiss watch. It would be clinical. Efficient. And bland. Instead we have this amazing cacophony of creation with koalas and cataracts, flowers and fawns, galaxies and glaciers.

Human beings should be all pretty much the same. Instead we are this wonderful medley of unique individuals, coming in different shapes and sizes, with different coloured hair and different shaped noses, speaking a myriad of languages, dancing different dances, making unique music. All very inefficient. And very, very beautiful and very, very exciting.

Even food could just be a bland pill, containing the essential nutrients we need. Instead we have a smorgasbord of wonderfully tasty and colourful options from tomatoes to truffles.

God is, in fact, a master artist. Yes, His entire creation all works together brilliantly. More than that, He chooses to create extravagantly in a trillion different colours, textures, and temperaments. It doesn't need to be this way. But it is. Because this is who God is. God is a God of beauty, mystery, and awesome splendour.

*"When we first encounter God in the Bible, it is not as the awesome Lawgiver or the Judge of the universe but as the Artist"* (Michael Card). God created us to appreciate beauty. What this amazing beauty in the cosmos should do, is move us to worship the Creator.

When someone builds a beautiful Temple, the whole building is designed to tell the story of the god. The architecture, the art, the furnishings, the smell, everything is intended to glorify the god to whom its built. Genesis deliberately describes God's work of creation as Him building a Temple. A beautiful, glorious, amazing Temple that expresses who He is.

The last thing that goes into a temple is the image of the god to whom the Temple is dedicated. The image represents the presence of the god. And the last thing God puts in the Temple of His creation is ...? Human beings. Created in the image of God. We human beings – with all our inefficient diversity, complexity, uniqueness, mystery, and beauty – are created in the image of God.

We represent God. This doesn't mean we look like God physically. It means that when God created this amazing creation and put us in it to tend and care for it, we are doing His work. We curate His art gallery. We manage His creation. We are custodians of His treasure.

But there is more to it than that. Created in God's image also refers to the innate desire with us to worship the true God. We are only images, reflections, of the awesome creative God. Built into our character and DNA is an urge to worship our true creator. *"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"* (Psalm 27:4). God is a God of beauty, and we, created in His image, are designed to worship Him.

### ***Created to Create***

Being created in the image of God, also relates to the urge, within many of us, to create as well. *"If the opening chapters of Genesis portray God as a creative artist, then it only stands to reason that the people he made in his image will also be artists. Art is an imaginative activity, and in the act of creating, we reflect the mind of our Maker"* (Philip Graham Ryken).

*"We are driven to create at this deep wordless level of the soul because we are all fashioned in the image of a God who is an Artist,"* writes musician Michael Card. Our desire to quilt, write stories, sing, make a beautiful meal, build with Lego, garden, paint, sculpt, build with wood, colour, write poems, sew, bake, sculpt, make puzzles, and so much more is part of being human, part of being made in the image of God.

We may not be great at any of these things – "being good at" doesn't matter. We all have the urge to create. What skills and abilities has God given you? What do you like to do?

True, God does also specifically gift people with a special measure of artistic talent. This brings us to Exodus 31.

For several chapters, which we skipped over, God has been describing a beautiful tent – or Tabernacle – which was to be God's "dwelling place" among the people. It is a precursor to the Temple in Jerusalem. God goes on to describe its furnishings – things like the ark of the covenant, an altar, and special – glorious – garments for the priests. God is concerned for the details. The sights and smells, the glow of the colours, the feel of the fabrics, the grain of the wood and the sparkle of the precious stones are all lovingly described in Exodus.

But they didn't spring fully formed from heaven. It would take ordinary men and women to work hard, using their God-given skills, and keeping in step with God's Spirit, for the tabernacle to become a beautiful reality, a suitable focus for God's holy presence.

So God calls special people, and fills them with His Spirit. Interestingly, the first people described as *"filled with the Spirit of God"* in the Bible are not Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or even Moses and Aaron, but these artists (31:3). In this particular passage, God says of one person, Bezalel, *"I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills."* God also personally appoints another person, Oholiab, to be his assistant.

Notice, (1) God does not call Moses and Aaron to make the Tabernacle, its furnishings, and

the priestly garments. Moses and Aaron have amazing gifts, but others are far more skilled when it comes to being artistic and creative.

(2) The creativity God calls forth from Bezalel and Oholiab is incredibly diverse. Art is not just drawing, painting or music. Creating the Tabernacle, furniture and garments will involve carpentry, sewing, embroidery, metal-working, stone-cutting, sculpting, engraving, jewelry-making, incense-making and much, much more. To that list, of course, we could add other forms of creativity from gardening to poetry-writing, from music-making to knitting, from gourmet cooking to dancing (David did!). God loves all kinds of art.

(3) Their art reflects their faith in God and is an offering of worship to God. Some of the art associated with the Tabernacle is explicitly “religious” – the ark of the covenant, for instance, is designed with angels to symbolize God’s protection and care. But some of it represents the real world in which the Israelites live, like pomegranates on the robes of high priest. It not all “religious” art. It reflects their lives, which is all lived in God’s presence.

(4) Although they are given some instructions, God still leaves a lot to their imagination. They are free to use their God-given minds and imagination in their art.

(5) God does inspire Bezalel and Oholiab. But a lot of other people will help out, too. All of us can create, as well. We don’t have to be particularly talented or gifted. We need to keep creativity in perspective: the greatest works of art ever, say a Mona Lisa or a Taj Mahal, are of infinitely less worth in God’s eyes than the people who made them.

The particular skill or talent you have (or don’t have) doesn’t matter. Whether it’s singing a new song, drawing a new drawing, knitting a new toque for the shelter, or baking a new cake – we can do it all for the glory of God, if we choose to. In the Psalms, one of the primary forms of creativity is writing poetry and making music. Six times various psalm writers cry out, *"Sing a new song to the Lord! Let the whole earth sing to the Lord!"* (Psalm 98:1).

### ***Creativity as spiritual journey***

The Israelites are in the midst of a 40-year odyssey in a desert wasteland. The last thing you’d think they “need” is an elaborate Tabernacle, fancy furniture, and gem-encrusted priestly garments. First of all, it will take time to make it – time they could spend doing “more important things.” Second, some of it is not specifically symbolic or useful – it’s just art for art’s sake – or, more properly, art for God’s sake.

And yet, maybe that is exactly what they need. First, they do need to be reminded that God – the great, glorious, beautiful God of creation – is with them. It is good for us, during this time of “Covid-wandering” to remember the God of beauty is still with us. The world is not all dark. There is still joy, hope, love, peace, and beauty in the world – thanks be to God.

And when you are down and out, there is therapy in doing something, making something, accomplishing something. Sometimes spending time creating things is exactly what we need to do, too. Art can nourish our souls. During these hard times, writing something, drawing

something, knitting something, cooking something might be exactly what our souls need. Art doesn't have to have some profound meaning. It can simply be art for God's sake.

Madeleine L'Engle, author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, writes, "*The discipline of creation, be it to paint, compose, write, is an effort towards wholeness.*" In other words, through creative acts like writing, sewing, baking, gardening, carpentry, music, and painting, we can actually improve our mental, physical, and spiritual health.

***Art can express our worship.*** We can see this in music and poetry, of course. From great hymns like "To God Be the Glory" to contemporary songs like "Creation Calls." Or poems we write. Or art we create.

***Art can express our struggles.*** The writers of songs like "It is Well with My Soul" or "Blessed Be Your Name" express and process through their personal pain and distress. When my facial pain first developed, it was crippling. One of the things I discovered was what I came to call "Lego-therapy." Having young boys at the time, building things with Lego took just enough brain-power to take my mind off the pain, but not enough brain power that I was unable to function. And at the end of the day, you had something to show for your time. You felt like you'd accomplished something. Writing a poem, making a jigsaw puzzle, baking cookies, going for a walk and taking pictures in the coulees are similar activities. They take just enough thought to distract me from my stress, they help me process my struggles, but not enough to wear me out.

***Art can express our faith.*** We can share our emerging understanding of God and His good news. For me, I love to paint God's creation. A painting of Mt. Rundle is not simply a painting of a random mountain, it is an act of worship of the Creator. I've noticed that many of the works of art I am drawn to, and I create, have a pathway or a road. They embody a sense of journey, from where I am to a place closer to God just around the corner.

### ***Remember your First Love***

*Remember your first love – how much you enjoyed creating as a child,"* writes Makoto Fujimura, a painter. *"If you ever lose that sense of joy you will need to reflect on why you lost that spark."* He goes on, *"A child of God knows that he or she is loved. And because of that love, which exceeds our own love, we can move out and take risks in creativity."*

Most of us as young children loved to draw, paint, write stories, build with Lego, write stories. What happens, as we grow older?

God has created us with amazing minds, and amazing imaginations. Rediscover some of that creativity you had as a child. Try drawing a tree. Try writing a psalm. Sing songs in the shower. If you dare, dance like David to your favourite worship song (God wants to turn our "*mourning into joyful dancing*" (Psalm 30:11)). Whatever you do expresses who you are – as a child of God. Art is an inherently hopeful act, one that echoes the creativity of the Creator. Even if no one else sees it, God sees it. God rejoices in our acts of creativity, just as any loving father dotes on his child's wild drawings.

It will be good therapy for you. It can help us reflect on and worship God. And it may just help you draw closer to God. And find new hope, new peace, new love, and new joy in Him. Something in the creative process helps us draw nearer to the heart of our loving Father. In these dark, difficult times, pick up a pen or a pencil, listen to music, dance (in your heart at least). And know that God is with you.

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