



all things bright and beautiful

PART EIGHT – THE GOODNESS OF ART

By Pastor Robert MacDonald

Exodus 25:1-9; 32:5-6; 31:1-5

I. The Empty Throne and the Golden Calf

Exodus goes HGTV

Exodus is this incredible story of God freeing the enslaved nation of Israel. Ten plagues, Charlton Heston, parting seas and pillars of fire. Then some laws...ok. I guess those are important. Then...clothes, a tent and some décor.

¹ *The LORD said to Moses,*

² “Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering.

You are to receive the offering for me from everyone
whose heart prompts them to give.

³ These are the offerings you are to receive from them:
gold, silver and bronze;

⁴ blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen; goat hair;

⁵ ram skins dyed red and another type of durable leather; acacia wood;

⁶ olive oil for the light; spices for the anointing oil
and for the fragrant incense;

⁷ and onyx stones and other gems to be mounted on the ephod and breastpiece.

⁸ “Then have them make a sanctuary for me,
and I will dwell among them.

⁹Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you.

Exodus 25:1-9

This section of the Biblical story – the exodus of Israel – doesn't end with freedom. It doesn't end with a law.

It ends with God making His home in the midst of Israel. If we read on, we get a description of the Ark of the Covenant.

On top, a throne – in Hebrew, Kapporet [(כַּפֹּרֶת) kap-po'-reth] – in the NIV, they call it the atonement cover. Traditionally, it has been called a ‘mercy seat,’ which helps us connect to the function of the Kapporet: the footstool of the throne of the invisible God.

An empty throne – potent and poetic...fitting for the God who can't be contained.

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The Need for Art and Symbol

One of the first observations we can make is that God is recognizing a need to interact with him in a tactile way. As Pastor Dave and Pastor Ricky talked about earlier in this series, our bodies are good creations by a good God, and He wants to interact with us through our senses.

Israel feels this need for a focal point for worship so deeply that they jump the gun and try to make something on their own. Exodus Chapter 32...it's the famous 'Golden Calf' story.

⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD."

⁶ So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.
Exodus 32:5-6

God's name is invoked, but in this haphazard way. As we read through the Old Testament, we see the Golden Calf pop up over and over again as artificial Yahweh worship. It's people trying to wrap their heads around the God who can't be contained, putting Him on a level of any old deity in a pantheon.

Art is Not Neutral

The term calf is used in scripture as a bit of an insult by biblical authors – roasting that form of worship. The actual statue would have been of a young bull, like the one in this picture - powerful, virile and majestic. God is strong. God is powerful, and He had just shown Israel how powerful He was; but the God of Israel was dishonored in specificity.

That's why God commands Israel:

⁴You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.
Exodus 20:4

A few chapters later, God commissions images of the Cherubim. This command isn't meant to stifle the creation of artwork. It's that there's a danger in trying to eliminate the mystery of the God who can't be contained. So the art that God commissions isn't a statue.

It's a tent. It's an empty throne – art that opens up – that's fruitful – that draws in our imagination and incites wonder.

II: Some Thoughts on Engaging With Art

Now we find ourselves in one of the most art-blasted cultures in human history. If you want to drive yourself crazy, count how many ads you see in a day. Let's look at four thoughts on how we navigate this landscape well.

A. Use Discernment

First, use discernment. One of the things that made the Golden Calf so dangerous was that it came from inside the camp – a creation of Aaron the High Priest; and a ton of great, beneficial stuff is made by people outside the Christian camp.

As we engage with art, regardless of who made it, we use our old friend 'discernment.' It's a muscle that we build for navigating the grey areas of life, helping us to sort through the crazy, convenience store of a world we live in. As Jesus says,

"...be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."
Matthew 10:16

B. Enjoy It

If you weren't here last week, Pastor Dave did a great sermon on joy and the art of not taking ourselves too seriously. Some circles have made the project of discerning helpful and unhelpful art into an obsession, excel spreadsheet, this percentage of this content, that percentage of that – like the Atkins diet for media.

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Whatever your approach to sifting through the artistic landscape, enjoy the ride. I love this quote from Artist Makoto Fujimura that he made on the Undeceptions Podcast:

“When we go on a date, we don’t do oftentimes purpose-driven things. We do unnecessary things. And that shows that at the heart of love is this gratuitous beauty, abundance that is given to us as a gift...And so I would think art belongs in that gift territory.”¹

C. Pursue Truth

Earlier this year, we went on a Cultivated Arts Field Trip to the art museum downtown. For that particular exhibit, a lot of the artists came from oppressed people groups, difficult periods in history or violent contexts. In our debriefing discussions afterward, a lot of us noted a lack of shiny happy feelings. People were depicting the experience of evil. Evil has a deep way of punching us in the gut; and good art, when it’s depicting bad stuff, should make us feel the badness.

As Christians, we can experience art like this as a call for justice; and, ultimately, a cry for the coming reign of Jesus. That’s part of why I love Psalm 88 – the most Nirvana-esque of the Psalms. The psalmist says things like:

⁶ *You have put me in the lowest pit,
in the darkest depths.*
Psalms 88:6

Or its closing line:

¹⁸ *You have taken from me friend and neighbor—
darkness is my closest friend.*
Psalms 88:18

The psalmist is being rhetorical when he says:

¹¹ *Is your love declared in the grave,
your faithfulness in Destruction?*
¹² *Are your wonders known in the place of darkness,
or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?*
Psalms 88:11-12

The psalmist is declaring the wrongness of death and suffering, but is also crying out for something that seems impossible – that God’s faithfulness would last beyond death. We read this Psalm with both grief, as well as the knowledge that God is indeed faithful beyond the grave.

D. Mind the Medium

One of the cool things that happens with art is that it comes to us in packages – or mediums. Songs, poems, stories, paintings, sculptures and plays. The Bible itself contains a variety of mediums and genres.

Are there artistic mediums that you go to all the time? Maybe try some other mediums, and see what it does to your soul. Variety, as the proverb goes, makes life spicy. It can also keep us from turning into weirdos.

III: Created To Create

A. The Value of the Creative Process

Check out Exodus 31:1-5, where we read about the guy who creates all the stuff God commissioned:

¹ *Then the LORD said to Moses,*
² *“See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son
of Hur, of the tribe of Judah,
³ and I have filled him with the **Spirit of God**,
with wisdom, with understanding, with
knowledge and with **all kinds of skills** –
⁴ to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver
and bronze,
⁵ to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to
engage in all kinds of crafts.*
Exodus 31:1-5

Exodus 31:3 is the first time a biblical author says that someone is ‘filled with the Spirit.’ This portion of scripture is the second time a dwelling place for God has been built.

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The first is found in Genesis 1, which describes this parallel pre-construction scene:

² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and **the Spirit of God** was hovering over the waters.

Genesis 1:2

There's this deep, swirling chaos, and the Spirit of God is hovering over – I imagine a sense of excitement at the possibility. To us, it's overwhelming noise; but to God, it's building material.

Author Madeleine L'Engle writes:

Leonard Bernstein tells me more than the dictionary when he says that for him music is *cosmos in chaos*. That has the ring of truth in my ears and sparks my creative imagination. And it is true not only of music; all art is cosmos, cosmos found within chaos.²

Engaging in the creative process is a way that we engage with God's creation as image-bearers. Learning to see potential and possibility, and learning to edit when the time comes. It's worth our time.

B. The Value of Skill

Notice the word 'skill' there. It pops up a lot of places when the Bible is talking about the arts.

The starting point for building skills is just to start. Skill comes by doing. The more skill you have, the easier it is to express using your medium. I've been playing piano for about 25 years; and over time, the gap between what I want to play and actually playing it gets smaller and smaller. Over time, artistic mediums sort of become like a second language. New ways to experience and express life in God's creation.

Skill also helps you appreciate art in new ways. You begin to understand how difficult certain techniques are, to notice unorthodox choices. It opens up a whole world of joy and beauty.

C. The Value of Community

If you want to grow as an artist, do it with other people! There are art classes to take, open mic nights to join. Doing creative stuff with other people is just better.

We have a really cool, encouraging community of creatives here at Summit Drive. Krystle leads a ministry called Cultivated Arts that's all about engaging with

creativity through the lens of faith through putting on various events throughout the year.

Healthy creative communities expand our heart's vocabularies and pull out our own unique expression. They do the same thing the Mercy seat does – spark imagination – give us a focal point for the God who can't be contained.

IV: The Empty Throne and the Cross

Some sections of the Athanasian Creed's description of the Trinity:

We worship one God in trinity and the trinity in unity, neither blending their persons nor dividing their essence.

For the person of the Father is a distinct person, the person of the Son is another, and that of the Holy Spirit still another... the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God. Yet there are not three gods; there is but one God.³

Trinitarian theology hurts the brain, and that's appropriate for the God who spoke matter and space into being. He's not supposed to fit inside our brains. He's supposed to be encountered.

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Pastor Dave and Pastor Ricky talk about how communion has this same quality. A meal, given to us without prescription or explanation. It's stuff of earth mingling with the stuff of heaven. It sparks our imagination, invites us into mystery. It's a symbol fitting for the God who can't be contained.

²⁵ God publicly displayed him at his death as the **mercy seat** accessible through faith.
Romans 3:25a

Could we with ink the ocean fill
and were the skies of parchment made,
were ev'ry stalk on earth a quill
and ev'ry man a scribe by trade,
to write the love of God above
would drain the ocean dry;
nor could the scroll contain the whole,
tho' stretched from sky to sky.⁴



Dig In

- 1.What types of art mediums you most easily engage with (books, movies, music, etc.)?
- 2.Describe an experience where you learned something valuable about God and His world by interacting with art that wasn't made by a Christian.
- 3.Is there a creative skill you'd like to engage in more? What might that look like? What's holding you back?
- 4.Read Psalm 88. What is your emotional response to the Psalm? How does it inspire you to pray?
- 5.Read John 19:1-37. What does this scene tell us about the God who can't be contained?

Prayer:

Spend some time asking God for eyes to see, ears to hear, hands to touch, and mouths to express the goodness of God's creation. Ask for growth in both joy and discernment as we navigate our art-stuffed world.