

## Faith and Art: Beauty is Essential

Part of the **With All Your Mind** Sermon Series

Exodus 36:8-34

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I am tempted to apologize for today's scripture reading. Twenty-six verses of painstaking architectural instruction might seem like a bit much, even to those who have ever served on our Building and Grounds committee.

It's a lot, and like I said, I am tempted to apologize for foisting it upon you this morning. On the other hand, if you were to read the full account of the Tabernacle's creation, you would start at Exodus chapter 25, verse 1, and finish at Exodus chapter 40, verse 38. Looking at it that way, maybe it's less, "I'm sorry" and more, "You're welcome," since I have at least spared you the other 532 verses of this particular Biblical story.

In sharing even this small excerpt, though, my professor, Dr. Sam Balentine, is finally vindicated. Back in olden days, when I was a student at Union Seminary, we anticipated Old Testament sort of the way you anticipate a root canal — something to endure and hopefully get behind you as quickly as possible, and if you're lucky, you won't remember too much of the agony once it's over.

We spent a week learning about the tabernacle's construction. I should have realized that meant something significant, but when it came time to study for the final exam, though, well, there's a lot of material in the Old Testament, and I couldn't for the life of me

imagine that details of cubits and curtains and clasps would make the cut.

The first question on the first page of the in-class, closed-book exam? "Draw the Tabernacle as God instructed Moses to build it. Your drawing should be to scale and include furnishings." I didn't even try. I drew a box, and inside the box I wrote, "The human brain can only retain so much information. Should I ever need to know the minutiae of the Tabernacle, I know exactly where to look it up." I did not get an A on that exam.

And 14 years later, here we are, reflecting together on the very same details I brashly declared I'd never need to know. This may be an excellent time to remind you that if I am boring you to tears, there is an artist right over there, proclaiming the good news with his paintbrush. Because we're talking about the intersection of faith and art today. In the last couple of weeks, we've considered faith and science, and faith and history, and next week we'll finish up with faith and math.

But Jesus instructs us to love God with all our heart and soul and strength and mind — with all of our mind. And just as that means a critical examination of subjects that revolve around facts and figures, it means more than that, too.

The human brain is made up of two hemispheres — the left brain and the right brain. And you may be familiar with the idea

that we all have one side of the brain that is more dominant. Supposedly, left-brained people are more logical, more at home in the hard sciences, while right-brained people are more creative, more at home in the arts. I'd heard this repeated so often in so many different spaces, I thought it was true. Just recently, I learned it's not.

It is true that each hemisphere of the brain controls different functions. The left side of the brain handles analytical and verbal tasks, while the right side takes care of spatial perception and contributes emotional context to our language. But linking this with individual personality traits or individual academic prowess is all myth.

In 2013, the University of Utah conducted a study on exactly this that analyzed over 1,000 people. They found no evidence of anyone having a dominant side of the brain. Each side of the brain does work harder at different times, but this is based on the task at hand, and does not vary person by person. Every single participant, from engineers to musicians, relied equally on both sides of their brains.<sup>1</sup>

Which means there is a lesson here for all of us today, even for those who can't carry a tune in a bucket or those who are always chosen last for Pictionary. Or even those who claim there's no need to fuss over the details of the tabernacle.

Because the tabernacle was a work of art. It's easy to lose sight of that over the many, many verses. But the tabernacle is not made of mud and sticks and whatever is easily found.

The curtains are made of fine twisted linen, and yards dyed rich hues of blue and purple and crimson. They are enormous, and held together with gold clasps. The frame of the tabernacle is built of acacia, wood that is durable and strong, wood that resists decay, and each frame fits carefully into another, joined together with forged silver, and the curtains are hung over these frames on bars overlaid with gold. It's extravagant, really. So extravagant that it's fair to pause and wonder, is this good, or just too much?

So while we're paused, let's remember what happens before the tabernacle comes into being. The Israelites were enslaved in Egypt for generations. Moses led them out of Egypt, but once they were set free, they found themselves wandering in the wilderness. The wilderness is a hard place to be. It's less a place on the map and more a condition of spirit. The Israelites were lost in it for 40 years. And even though it had to be better than slavery, they whined about it constantly. "God," they said, "this is the literal worst." "God", they complained, "we would be better off dead."

That is what wilderness can do to us — tunnel our vision down to one tiny, fragmented moment, and make it seem like good news might actually be good for nothing, at least not in days overwhelmed with toil and trouble. We are not strangers to wilderness, are we?

So it is important to remember what God does next. God says to Moses (and I may be paraphrasing a bit here), "I know. I know these are not easy times. It's going to be okay. I

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<sup>1</sup> <https://now.northropgrumman.com/the-left-brain-right-brain-myth-is-it-true/>

promise it's going to be okay. And I know it's hard to remember that, so do this: build me a dwelling place, a physical space that can go where you go and rest where you rest. Build me a tabernacle to help you remember, in concrete and tangible ways, that I am with you always."

And then God says, "And when you build that tabernacle, make it beautiful. Make it of gold and silver and bronze. Make it of blue and purple and crimson yarns. Make it of linen and leather, oil and onyx. Take gold and weave it among the fibers so that all the threads glimmer in the light. Take stones and gems and set them in the bronze, so that everything that is strong, is also sublime." "Make it beautiful," God says.

And here is the thing about that. God didn't need the tabernacle to be beautiful. God doesn't need anything from us. The Westminster Confession of Faith, which is part of our tradition, says, "God has all life, glory, goodness, and blessedness in and of himself; God is all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which he has made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting his own glory in, by, unto, and upon them."

God didn't need the tabernacle to be beautiful. God knew we needed the tabernacle to be beautiful. God knew the Israelites needed beauty to accompany them everywhere they went, and God knows we still need beauty by our side every step of the way. because "life is hard, and beauty is fuel."<sup>2</sup> Beauty is essential.

That is a theological claim. David Benjamin Blower writes: "Christian hope is anticipatory. We are not forever looking backwards at a merely mechanistic atonement in the past, nor are we looking sideways for momentary escape from the experience of the present. Christian hope looks, ultimately, forward, to the renewal of creation, to the healing of the nations, to a time when God's goodness resides fully among us.

Every glimpse of beauty is a glimmer of this end, a present manifestation of a future which will ultimately swallow up and transform a suffering and broken present. The faithful artist works to cultivate this sort of anticipatory imagination."<sup>3</sup> Every glimpse of beauty is a glimmer, a hint, of God's promised day. And every hint of that day brings us closer to it, and sustains us to keep going. That's why beauty is not just nice, not just pleasant, not just aesthetic. It's essential.

In her book Beauty and Being Just, Elaine Scarry draws a direct connection between experiencing beauty and pursuing justice. She writes, "Beauty prompts a copy of itself." Here's what she means by that — "When you see something beautiful, it stops you in your tracks. It makes us want to replicate it somehow — draw it, write a song about it, tell someone about it. Once I saw a cottage that was so beautiful it would not let me walk past without stopping to admire it first. The front door was all but hidden by low boughs and flowering vines. The sidewalk was lined with flowers and folk art. I had to take a picture of it, even though

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<sup>2</sup> This line comes from the poet Andrea Gibson. I no longer remember what poem, but have quoted the line often.

<sup>3</sup> As quoted by Makoto Fujimura in his book Art + Faith

I don't have a Facebook page or Instagram account to post on. I just had to make a copy of it, because it was too beautiful for there to be just one of it in the world."

Seeing beauty awakens something in us that makes us long for more of it. And that's not just limited to paintings, poems, sculptures, and symphonies, but also gardens, cakes, designs in newly mowed grass, and babies, but then also again friendship, and laughter, and welcome, and justice.

Justice realized, Scarry suggests, is itself a form of beauty, and seeing it compels persons of faith to replicate it. "Love begets love," the poets have long claimed. Perhaps, too, then, beauty begets beauty, and justice begets justice. There are some, though, who have made the case that beauty and justice are in fact in opposition to one another. That attention spent focusing on beauty is attention taken away from focusing on justice. That funds spent in artistic ways are funds taken away from places of deeper, more practical, more immediate needs.

Now, most things in life are nowhere near as much of a zero-sum game as we make them out to be. But even still, those observations and questions come from a place of deep concern and, therefore, deserve our worthy consideration.

Here is what I can offer. Becoming familiar and fluent with beauty changes the way we see the world. Because when we are more attune to the beauty around us, we by default become more attune to that which is not beautiful — that which has been injured, or disfigured, or cheapened, or belittled. And we cannot mend

broken until we see that it is broken. We cannot know that a note is off-key until we know what the right pitch is supposed to sound like.

We cannot always tell what is missing until we know completeness.

I heard a theoretical physicist give a lecture recently. I understood one out of every six sentences, but it was enough. Physicists study the fundamental laws of nature, she said, and she spends her days looking for the most basic ingredients that make up everything and everyone. And then she said this: Here is scientific evidence, there are studies that prove, time and time again, that we almost always fail to notice the things we are not expecting. Even when they are right there in front of us.

I think that's why God said to Moses, make me a tabernacle, and make it beautiful. Not because God needed it. Because God knew we would need it. So among other things, they made curtains, curtains of blue and crimson and purple, fine linen woven together with strands of glittering gold, curtains that were beautifully hemmed to hang in the presence of God.

And maybe, just maybe, that's why gospels tell us of the woman in need of healing who reached out and grabbed at the hem of Jesus' garment generations and lifetimes later. Beauty is so woven into the hem of our story it might end up being that which finally heals us all.