

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
August 11, 2024

A Work of Art

Exodus 31:1-11

For a long time, congregations have been using art as a means of experiencing God's glory and proclaiming the good news of his kingdom. Though we may not always be aware of it or think about it very much, various forms of artistic expression are part of our church's worship, fellowship, and witness. Bulletin covers, hymns and other forms of music, a baptistry painting, floral arrangements on the communion table, worship banners, PowerPoint slide backgrounds, and vestibule photos are all elements of the space and atmosphere in which we come together. Add to these the art that's woven into our instruction and activities with children. On many Sundays you'll see our boys and girls emerge from Sunday School or Children's Church with a snack in one hand and a colorful craft in the other. All these are reminders that where God's people gather, there's a lot of taken-for-granted art.

Bezalel would be pleased and proud. We meet him in this morning's text from Exodus. Actually, if some of that reading sounds familiar to you, it's because I used part of it in a recent children's sermon highlighting the many people whose faithful work goes into caring for and enhancing the building and grounds here at our church. Individuals like Don, Ronnie, Jerry, Dan, Amber, Archie, and Kyle, among others. True, the house is the Lord's, but the hands that help create and maintain it are very human.

So it is in our Scripture passage today. The project is the tabernacle, also called the Tent of Meeting. It's essentially a portable sanctuary, a dwelling place for the Lord, a home for holiness. The Israelites used this portable house of worship during their journey in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses. But during the construction phase, Moses would have been lost without Bezalel, the chief architect of the tabernacle project. He designed and oversaw its construction, giving meticulous attention to every detail. Bezalel's chief assistant was Oholiab, a craftsman known for his skills in design and embroidery. Together, Bezalel and Oholiab made an impressive team. They not only knew their stuff, but also knew how to communicate it to others, whom they trained and supervised as the project unfolded.

Notice how Bezalel is described as someone who is filled with the Spirit of God (v. 3). Having the Spirit of God is often associated with knowledge, discernment, and understanding. But in this case, the wisdom that comes with the Spirit of God isn't excessively cerebral. It certainly includes, but is more than, intellectual capabilities. Being filled with the Spirit of God also means that Bezalel possesses the practical abilities and skills needed to fashion something physical and material, a structure that will be a tangible sign of God's presence, a palpable dwelling for God's glory. In other words, Bezalel has the divine wisdom, both in his head and in his hands, to create something that will be appealing to the senses. And these abilities and skills don't come from Bezalel himself. They come from God.

God is the one who initiates and lays out the tabernacle project. The vision and the command start with the Lord. But the actual implementation of the project is very much human work. This human effort, however, is powered and energized by the Spirit of God. In the Scriptures, God's Spirit is often associated with wind or breath. God's breath is the source of life, the means by which God creates and transforms. So at its most basic level, the tabernacle project, the work done by Bezalel and Oholiab and all the other people involved, is driven by the life-giving wind of God, the Spirit of God.

The Spirit's creativity starts to take shape in the form of Bezalel and Oholiab's labor. Our text details the ways that metals, stones, wood, and fabric became artistic materials in the hands of these skilled individuals. Their craftsmanship became tools by which God built a dwelling place for his holiness. Then to the essential structure of the tabernacle were added all the furnishings and fragrances that would create a multi-sensory encounter with the God who had brought them out of Egyptian bondage. In light of a text like this, it's no wonder that in our own day and time, many congregations have rediscovered and reincorporated various forms of art and artistic expression into their experiences of worship and their mission to the world beyond their walls.

In May 2015, renovation began on St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. About a year later, at a cost of nearly \$200 million, the project was complete. One magazine described the work this way:

More than 150 workers, directed by the architecture firm Murphy Burnham & Buttrick, made 30,000 separate interventions, planned and tracked with advanced software but executed by hand. Workers filled the interior with a city of scaffolding. Specialists climbed it to heal cracks in stained glass, fix shattered bits of tracery with invisible puzzle pieces of steel, scour soot off blackened marble, rebuild eroded filigree, replace crumbling stones, replaster ribbed vaults, and revivify wooden screens.

The result is so conspicuously glorious that it makes Rockefeller Center look suddenly shabby by comparison....¹

I was also impressed to read that the project included restoring the cathedral's nearly 10,000 pound front doors. When our sanctuary doors, which weigh much less, swing open for you to leave today, you can be assured that we spent a much more modest amount for the fresh coat of paint in our vestibule.

Whether the project is as grand as a cathedral restoration or as humble as fixing our fellowship hall wall, it takes skilled hands, enabled by the Spirit of God, to get the job done. In that respect, this place where we gather each week to meet God is a work of art. And as I highlighted at the beginning of this sermon, the space itself, especially the sanctuary, includes certain forms of art. But the most important work of art is this congregation itself. We, in our life together, become the material with which God works to create something beautiful, a community of people where he takes up residence and makes his glory known to the world. As Paul says in today's reading from Ephesians, "In him [Christ] the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (2:21-22).

God intends Grace Baptist Church to be a work of art. We're the product of his wisdom, the fruit of his creativity. We're not self-made. We're brought into existence by the Lord, who has chosen to take up residence in this world in and through a community of people who reflect his holiness. As a congregation, our past, our present, and our future are in God's skilled hands. He faithfully forms us and fashions us, working to make us more into the

likeness of Christ. And note that this doesn't happen instantaneously. God is patient in his craftsmanship.

In 1882 the artist and architect Antoni Gaudi started work on his masterpiece, The Church of the Holy Family, in Barcelona, Spain. As one person has summarized it, this church "was the unfinished summation of his life's work." He continues:

For several years he actually lived on the building site, breathing the dust, and drawing his ultimate inspiration from the organic symmetry of creation as well as the teachings of the church. As the building rose skyward from its foundations, Gaudi's fame also soared. Kings and queens came to see the building site, imagining what it would one day become.

But then, in old age, Gaudi was run over by a tram. Because of his ragged attire and empty pockets, taxi drivers refused to pick him up, thinking he was a tramp, and he was eventually taken to a pauper's hospital. Nobody recognized the great man until his friends eventually tracked him down the next day. They tried to move him into a nicer hospital, but Gaudi refused, reportedly saying, "I belong here among the poor." He died of his injuries two days later and was buried in the midst of his unfinished masterpiece.

Gaudi had begun planning *La Sagrada Familia* in the 1880s and was still working on it the day he died, some 40 years later. When Gaudi died in 1926, the basilica was between 15 and 25 percent complete. Other architects have since continued to apply and interpret his designs, but the towers and most of the church's structure are to be completed in 2026, the centennial of Gaudi's death; decorative elements should be complete by 2030 or 2032. Gaudi's vast project reminds us that we are all called to pour our lives into something bigger than ourselves. "My client," joked Gaudi on one occasion, "is not in a hurry."²

This God who is not in a hurry is still taking each of us, and our congregation as a whole, and using us to fashion his church, the people of God in Christ, a home for his holiness. Here in the part of God's people called Grace Baptist Church, God is still calling us to pour our lives into something bigger than ourselves. One way you do that is through your response to God's summons as it comes to you through our Nominating Committee's process.

As our committee reaches out to you in the days and weeks ahead, I pray that you'll join me in being open and responsive to the Spirit's leadership in how you may be good material in the hands of our creative and artistic God. Remember that Grace Baptist Church is more than just a religious organization, a collection of jobs that need to be done in order for this whole operation to run smoothly. Above all, we're God's handiwork. We're God's holy project, designed to display his saving love and glory.

But that doesn't mean there aren't sacred tasks that need to be done. Someone needs to plan the worship. Someone needs to prepare the music. Someone needs to instruct the adults. Someone needs to teach the children and youth. Someone needs to greet those who arrive. Someone needs to run the sanctuary computer. Someone needs to count the offering. Someone needs to pay the bills and oversee the budget. Someone needs to take the minutes. Someone needs to manage the nursery. Someone needs to prepare the communion trays. Someone needs to fix the air conditioner. Someone needs to organize the meals. Add to these lots of other roles and responsibilities in our church, and you begin to see that serving the Lord is about more than just acquiring Biblical knowledge. It's about practical wisdom. It's about the hands-on things you do in the congregation, things that God uses to make something that's holy and beautiful.

One leader at a church in Michigan tells about a worship experience the congregation participated in during a series of messages on brokenness. Each worshiper received a

broken tile as a reminder to reflect on the brokenness in their own lives, places where they needed the grace of Christ. They went into a time of silent confession, acknowledging how Christ welcomed them to his table. While they were doing that, a gentleman was spreading mortar on the top of a table. Then the people were invited to come forward to pray and to put their piece of tile into the mortar. They *all* came forward. And that became their church's communion table, a work of art where people still point out which tile is theirs and what they were thinking about when they placed it on the table.³

As our Nominating Committee reaches out to you, or as you seek them out, let the Lord take you, broken yet redeemed in Christ, and incorporate you into this work of art called Grace Baptist Church. That may mean continuing to serve where you've been serving, or exploring a different place and form of service, or perhaps stepping out to serve for the first time. Whatever your task and your part, know that the Lord is at work, fashioning us into a home for his holiness.

¹ Justin Davidson, "What We Can Learn from the Restoration of St. Patrick's Cathedral." *New York Magazine* (September 11, 2015). https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2015/09/learning-from-the-st-patricks-restoration.html?om_mid=_BV8ylkB9FZ3d9S&om_rid=AAENDa (August 7, 2024).

² Adapted from Pete Grieg, *God on Mute* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012) 214-217.

³ From Joan Huyser-Honig, "Visual Arts in Church: Making the Invisible Word Visible." *Calvin Institute of Christian Worship*. October 29, 2004. <https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/visual-arts-in-church-making-the-invisible-word-visible/> (August 8, 2024).