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Philippians 4:8

Ockenga Reflection:
Art & Beauty

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When Monica and I are on vacation we spot a contemporary art museum and I always say, “Hey, we should go check that out!” And then when we do go, I always hate it. I’m like, “What is this?!” So I’m preaching on art and beauty today... Let’s *pray*.

I was sitting in one of my classes in seminary when a student raised his hand. I didn’t know this student very well. He was hipster; he wore a beanie to class; and I found out later he played the guitar. He was an artist. He raised his hand and when the teacher called on him he asked, “Is ugliness a result of the fall?” I have to confess I rolled my eyes and thought that was the stupidest question I had ever heard. But now... I’m not so sure. I think that was actually a pretty good question. Has the sin of Adam and Eve and all humankind distorted our vision—whether we see something as beautiful or ugly?

I hope to answer this question today as we talk about art and beauty. Today’s sermon is a break from pure COVID-19 to focus our minds on things that are good and pleasing.

Art and beauty can calm our fears and lift our spirits.

In the book of Philippians, when teaching the believers how to deal with anxiety, Paul said:

Philippians 4:6a, 8b Do not be anxious about anything... (jumping down to verse 8) ...whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. (NIV)

It says if we’re anxious, we should think on “whatever is lovely”. In the Greek, “think about such things” is an imperative—it’s a command. We’re supposed to intentionally cultivate a habit of thinking about good things, of setting our mind on things that are true, noble, and lovely. Can’t this include art?

David Hockney is a British artist. He paints, draws, takes pictures, creates stage design, and is famous for his pop art.¹ In 2018 he designed a stained-glass window at Westminster Abbey for the queen. He “once turned down the chance to paint The Queen because he was too busy.”² He’s stuck at home like the rest of us but to encourage others he has released original paintings. One of daffodils is called “Do Remember They Can’t Cancel the Spring.”³ It looks simple but it’s rather quite beautiful. He drew this on his iPad.

If you’re an artist, or you love art, I hope this will encourage you to share your art or music, whatever you love with others. We could share pictures of our art in our church’s Facebook Group to encourage each other. I know we have resident artists... *Finley*. We’d love to see more of your work.

This should also cause us to pause and think about what we’re focusing on as we’re stuck at home. Right now everything is about, “What are you binge watching? Or “Did you catch the news?” The things we see shape how we’re feeling. *Art and beauty can calm our fears and lift our spirits*.

Why is that? Why do art and beauty move us in ways that medicine can’t? Because we are tapping into something transcendent, something beyond. When we create we are reflecting our Master Creator. God is the ultimate artist. All beauty and goodness reflect his goodness and beauty (Zech 9:17; James 1:17).

God is the Master Artist.

I read an article about the theology of art this week that sent me back to the very first chapter of the Bible.

Genesis 1:1-2 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 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. (NIV)

God is hovering over a massive watery canvas. Onto this canvas he begins to paint time and space, the universe, the stars, the planets, the heavens and the earth. He soars like a bird across the universe splashing galaxies and star clusters like paint.

- God paints “the Tarantula Nebula,” a giant mass of “ionized hydrogen gas” that spits out stars.⁴
- God paints “the Eagle Nebula’s Pillars of Creation” made of “gas clouds” and “dark cosmic dust.”⁵
- God paints “the Sombrero galaxy, Messier 104” with its “brilliant white” and in perfect view.
- God paints the planet Saturn with its beautiful rings and places it only 800 million miles away.
- God paints the milky way and places us in it on planet earth so we can enjoy the night sky.

God has been “creating” art and beauty since the beginning. *God is the Master Artist.*

Art and beauty have inherent worth.

Genesis one tells the story of God creating the universe, the world, and everything in it. As we go through the creation story, God creates something and then seven times it says “God saw that it was good.” The Hebrew word for good is “tov” and can mean “goodness” or “beauty.”⁶ When God creates land and vegetation and “God saw that it was good” (v10, 12) it doesn’t just mean that the creation was morally good, but that it was inherently beautiful.⁷ Creation was gorgeous, a work of art.

That tells us that there is inherent value in art and beauty even if there is no one there to see it.⁸ In the Genesis narrative humankind doesn’t arrive in creation till verse 26. In the first 25 verses of Genesis one says “God saw that it was good” six times. That means God saw that it was good before Adam or Eve or you or I arrived. Beauty is in the eye of the Beholder. I don’t mean little “b” beholder but big “B” Beholder—God himself.⁹ When God sees something and says, “that’s good”—God makes it good.

That means if you create a work of art, whether a painting, or short story, or novel, or song, or sculpture, or dance, or musical piece, or poetry, and no one sees it but you and God—that is enough. In our world we typically define how good something is by how much we can sell it for. Remember the guy who painted the daffodils on his iPad, David Hockney? One of his paintings sold for \$90 million dollars. He’s not even dead yet! Defining value by how many dollars we can get for it is a very “utilitarian” way of viewing art; like art is a product. The Bible tells us God values creation and beauty in and of itself.

As Christians, we can sometimes fall prey to treating art the same way; a very utilitarian way that doesn’t really value art and beauty in and of itself.¹⁰ Like, it has to “say something Christian” in order for it to be good—like for us to enjoy music it has to be Christian music or for us to enjoy a movie it has to be a Christian movie. But God created a whole bunch of things (stars, land, vegetation, animals) that could not audibly speak of him. Only through their nature and beauty could they speak of God and God saw them as good (Psalm 19; Romans 1:20). *Art and beauty have inherent worth.*

You may have noticed this beautiful painting I have on my wall. It's by a Russian artist named Alexander Volkov. He's a self-taught painter who paints realistic landscapes. This painting is called *The First Snowfall*. It shows the changing of the seasons down along a country road. The yellow leaves haven't fallen to the ground yet but already there's snow. There is nothing overtly religious in this painting and yet to me it declares God's beauty and the beauty of creation, which is Christian to its core.¹¹ It tells me about heaven and that it's just around the bend. This painting speaks to my soul because there is something inherently good in it. Maybe you look at this painting and it does nothing for you but you have one in your home that you bought or a family member painted or your child drew that is just beautiful. I have several of Elijah's originals hanging in my office and they're not for sale.

In the opening of his book *Culture Care: Reconnecting with Beauty for Our Common Life*, Makoto Fujimura tells a story of valuing art and beauty.

As a newlywed couple, my wife and I began our journey with very little. After Judy and I got married in the summer of 1983, after college, we moved to Connecticut for Judy to pursue her master's degree in marriage counseling. I taught at a special education school and painted at home. We had a tight budget and often had to ration our food (lots of tuna cans!) just to get through the week.

One evening I was sitting alone, waiting for Judy to come home to our small apartment, worried about how we were going to afford the rent and pay for necessities over the weekend. Our refrigerator was empty and I had no cash left.

Then Judy walked in, and she had brought home a bouquet of flowers. I got really upset.

"How could you think of buying flowers if we can't even eat!" I remember saying, frustrated.

Judy's reply has been etched in my heart for over thirty years now. "We need to feed our souls, too."¹²

Art and beauty have inherent worth. Does this mean that all art is inherently good? No it doesn't; but it changes the way we see art.

We need to see art and beauty through God's eyes.

Genesis 1 doesn't just say God created and "it was good" but that God created and "God *saw* that it was good." In *A Redemptive Theology of Art* by David Covington he explains that God is the "first Beholder". So we shouldn't judge art by just our own preferences but by what God might see in the art.¹³ Typically, when we're thinking about media, we ask WWJW, "What would Jesus watch?"¹⁴ I bet Jesus might surprise us. He ate and drank with prostitutes and tax-collectors, the social outcasts (Mark 2:15). Instead, we should ask, "How does God see this?"¹⁵ To help us see what God sees Covington suggests we stop asking if something is "Christian" and start asking:

"What of God's glory remains in this? What in this does God affirm? What can I affirm with him? What does he challenge? What does he call me to challenge, in myself by repentance or in another person or in the culture broadly? How can I love God and my neighbor right here? What message does it intend as truth? What power does it practice or honor? What ethics are in view here? What must be true about God for this message to work? Where does this work borrow from God's glory? How can a redeemed eye see this redemptively? What does God intend here?"¹⁶

Another framework Covington gives is to look at art through the lens of the big story of the Bible, which is a story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.¹⁷ How does the piece speak to each theme? I want us to

try and look at two pieces of Art through how God might want us to see them. The first piece is a little easier and the second is a little harder.

The first art piece is one of my favorites. It's called *Among the Sierra Nevada, California* by Albert Bierstadt (1868). Bierstadt painted this piece to advertise the great frontier. It really is a marketing piece because this scene doesn't exist in real life. Rather, it is a ideal blending of all very the best elements of the Sierra Nevada mountains and wildlife.¹⁸ In the background are snowy peaks that melt down into flowing rivers and waterfalls, cascading into a crystal clear lake where a herd of deer water and graze. As I look at this painting it reminds me of that final part of the Biblical story—restoration. God promises that one day he is going to remove all sin and brokenness and create a new heaven and new earth (Rev 21:1-4). Maybe this is just a taste of what eternity with Jesus will look like.

But what about paintings that are a little harder to understand or see their beauty? I'm going to show you another one that I asked the artist's studio if I could include in this sermon and they gave me the go-ahead.

A year ago at my first Doctorate of Ministry classes we talked about this painting, *The Hinterland, 2006* by British artist Glenn Brown. If you're like me when you saw this painting for the first time, you probably thought it was kind of jarring. Like, what is it? Is it a person or the blob? Is it a fish? I see arms and an eye and lips and flowers. What could it possibly be? Maybe instead, we should ask, "How does God see this? How does this tell us something about his story?"

This is not a religious piece, but I think it tells us about creation, fall, redemption and restoration. If you look closely at this painting, you can see it's very floral. There are greens, browns, yellows, blues, and reds, all colors we find in creation. There are flowers and other plants. They're all congealed but they're there. In this painting we see the beauty of Eden and creation but also the tragedy of the fall. We find goodness, but things are not as they were meant to be.

This painting helps us understand our own culture—which is a congealed amalgamation of beliefs and ideas. It's like he painted pluralism—that everything is good and everything is true, but with that idea comes a loss of distinction and identity. What does this provoke in each of us? If this painting is a picture of our culture and its beliefs, do we recoil in horror or reach out in compassion like Jesus did to us?

What does this art piece tell us about restoration? As I look at it I see flowers and roses and a bright-white light near the elbow. There's the possibility here of something more, a future hope. As Christians, this reminds us that one day God is going to come and take us and this world that's so messy and so in need and re-create us into something gorgeous and new.

If we can retrain how we see things like art—and see them how God might see them—it might train us to see other things differently too. Maybe we'll be able to see our relationships and friendships and needs and church differently, through God's eyes. Maybe we'll be able to see COVID-19 differently.

Whether the piece clearly speaks to our sensibilities or we have to look a little bit harder *we try and see art and beauty through God's eyes*. Why do we do this? Because God sees us this way.

God created us to be his beautiful masterpiece.

After God makes man and woman in his image it says (v27):

Genesis 1:31a God saw all that he had made, and it was very good... (NIV)

Men and women are the centerpiece of God's creation. We are made in his image and we are his most beautiful works of art. To be made in his image means we are made to create. We find God inviting people to

create works of beauty and art in the Bible. When he sets apart the people of Israel he calls Moses to build a tabernacle. The tabernacle is the tent where God's presence would dwell. Hear this description of the master craftsmen charged with creating the tabernacle:

Exodus 31:2-5 "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. (NIV)

Bezalel (BEZ-uh-lel) was a master artisan, someone who was skilled in their trade and can make something beautiful. God honored this man's artistry and this man was able to use it serve the Lord. God invites Bezalel to participate in his art exhibition and invites us too.

The tabernacle is gone but God still has a temple. We've been learning about the new temple in our series in Acts. The temple is the people of God, the church, not the building but all the people who know Jesus and have the Holy Spirit inside (Acts 2:1-4; 1 Cor 6:19). We are not God but God resides in us through the Holy Spirit. We beautify God's temple by how we live. I just read *Francis Schaeffer's Art and the Bible*. Schaeffer describes our lives as a work of art.

No work of art is more important than the Christian's own life, and every Christian is called upon to be an artist in this sense. He may have no gift of writing, no gift of composing or singing, but each man has the gift of creativity in terms of the way he lives his life. In this sense, the Christian's life is to be an art work. The Christian's life is to be a thing of truth and also a thing of beauty in the midst of a lost and despairing world.¹⁹

God created us to be his beautiful masterpiece. But if you know anything of humankind you know that we fall short (Rom 3:23). We introduced ugliness into our world when we rejected the one who is perfectly good. That's why we need someone from the land of beauty and God's goodness to come and rescue us. We need someone who is perfectly made in God's image but isn't broken like us. We need a master craftsman, an artist, a carpenter. We need a creator to come and make us new—to make us into a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). This is how the Scriptures describe the one who came.

Colossians 1:15-17 The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (NIV)

What artist is this passage talking about? Who is the one who created all things, on earth and heaven? *Jesus*.

Jesus, our Master Craftsman, came to make us beautiful.

God himself stepped into the canvas of creation.²⁰ Through Jesus God himself became a part of the painting to rescue his work of art, to restore us and make us new. Jesus offers you not just rescue from your sins if you'll trust in him, but restoration to a brand new future and eternal life with him. God promises that he will transform us into the new heaven and the new earth. He will take us to those Sierra Nevada Mountains. *Jesus, our Master Craftsman, came to make us beautiful.*

Numbers 6:24-26 (ESV)

24 The Lord bless you and keep you;

25 the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

26 the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

[“Message me on Facebook if you want to talk or email me at \[jonathan@cornerstonewestford.com\]\(mailto:jonathan@cornerstonewestford.com\).](#)

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message on Facebook Live during the 2020 COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic in Massachusetts. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes endnotes and references, or share it through [Apple podcasts](#) or [Google Play Music](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

You and your family or friends can use these group discussion questions to talk through today’s sermon. Please use whatever questions you find helpful.

1. What is your favorite piece of art and why?
2. How would you answer, “Is ugliness a result of the fall?”
3. What do you typically use to calm your fears and anxieties? Work? Entertainment? Other people? What of these things are like those characteristics found in Philippians 4:8 and what are distractions?
4. Do you like art? What do you like creating? How do you feel about sharing it with others? Would you ever share it with your church family?
5. Where in creation do you recognize God to be the Master Artist? In other words, what part of creation strikes you as especially beautiful?
6. How does God beholding creation as good before he created humankind change how we value art and beauty? How does this encourage us to create for the one who beholds all things (i.e., the Beholder)?
7. In your own personal life, do you value and appreciate artists that are Christian, non-Christian, or a mixture of the two? Do they have to be “Christian” in order for you to feel comfortable appreciating them? If yes, why is that?
8. Have you ever purchased art? What do you think of others when they spend money on art? Do you question them for not giving it to someone in need? Do you encourage them to feed their souls? Or do you feel some other way?
9. How have you typically evaluated art and beauty? Do you ask, “What would Jesus watch?” or “How does God see this?” What are some other questions we can ask?
10. How does looking through art through the big story of the Bible, creation, fall, redemption, and restoration, change the way we see art?
11. What did you think of *Among the Sierra Nevada, California* in contrast with *The Hinterland, 2006*? How did you respond to each? Why do you think you feel and think that way?
12. Why do you think God sees his creation of humankind as “very good” in Genesis 1? What about us gives us eternal significance and worth? Does that change how we live our lives?
13. Why would the Master Artist dare to enter his canvas? Imagine the Son of God stepping into the canvas of creation and being born as the baby Jesus. What does that tell us about the Artist’s love for his creation? How does the story unfold?

14. How do you feel about art and beauty now that you've heard this sermon and discussed these questions? Do you want to go and look at more art? Create your own? Talk about more important subjects? Why do you think you are responding this way?

End your discussion by praying for what you learned and that the Holy Spirit would help you apply it to your lives. Pray that Jesus would use it to further his beauty in our world.

- ¹ Wikipedia contributors. (2020, April 1). David Hockney. In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved 13:09, April 2, 2020, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=David_Hockney&oldid=948494940
- ² Westminster Abbey Queen's Window by David Hockney revealed. BBC News. Published September 26, 2018. Accessed April 2, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-45650539>
- ³ Will Gompertz. David Hockney shares exclusive art from Normandy as 'a respite from the news'. BBC News. Published April 1, 2020. Accessed April 2, 2020. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/comment/a-message-from-david-hockney-do-remember-they-can-t-cancel-the-spring>
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- ⁶ Mounce's Expository Dictionary.
- ⁷ Thaddeus Williams. *A Theology of Art in 2 Minutes*. The Gospel Coalition. Published March 9, 2019. Accessed April 2, 2020. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/theology-art-2-minutes/>
- ⁸ Thaddeus Williams. He makes this point in his article.
- ⁹ Covington, David A.. *A Redemptive Theology of Art* (p. 25). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.
- ¹⁰ Ryan Lister, Brett McCracken, Thomas Terry. *Why Is Christian Art So Often Bad?* The Gospel Coalition. Published August 20, 2019. Accessed April 2, 2020. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/tgc-podcast/christian-art-often-bad/>
- ¹¹ *Why We Should Get Rid of "Christian Art"* Cultural Conversations. Published February 28, 2018. Accessed April 5, 2020. <https://culturalconversations.com/2018/02/28/theres-no-such-thing-as-christian-art/>
- ¹² Fujimura, Makoto. *Culture Care*. InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition. Location 106.
- ¹³ Covington, David A.. *A Redemptive Theology of Art* (p. 94). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.
- ¹⁴ Covington, David A.. *A Redemptive Theology of Art* (p. 109-110). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.
- ¹⁵ Covington, David A.. *A Redemptive Theology of Art* (pp. 109-110). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.
- ¹⁶ Covington, David A.. *A Redemptive Theology of Art* (p. 171). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.
- ¹⁷ Covington, David A.. *A Redemptive Theology of Art* (p. 180). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.
- ¹⁸ Art Signs - Among The Sierra Nevada, California. Smithsonian American Art Museum. Published May 3, 2010. Accessed April 2, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=164&v=NDB6uMo3IHY&feature=emb_title
- ¹⁹ Schaeffer, Francis A.. *Art and the Bible* (IVP Classics) (p. 94). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition. I changed "cared" to "called." Perhaps this is a typo in the Kindle edition.
- ²⁰ Joshua Butler. *The Artist Who Entered His Canvas to Save It*. The Gospel Coalition. Published December 24, 2018. Accessed April 2, 2020. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/artist-canvas-save/>