

Inspired Artists  
Exodus 31:1-11  
1/5/2014

When we see a work of art, or hear a wonderful piece of music that is larger than life, or takes us out of ourselves, we often say that the artist was “inspired.” What we mean by that is usually that the artist had an idea that was very compelling. It was compelling to the artist, and that artist managed to communicate it so well that we are just as compelled as the artist was. Well, here in Exodus, we can talk about a different kind of inspired artist. Bezalel and Oholiab were called by God and anointed with the Holy Spirit to be artists for God. We have talked before about art, and we will be talking a good bit about art today as well.

The first thing to notice about these two artists is that God called them by name. This phrase “called them by name” has to do with an appointment or commission. In much the same way that artists are sometimes commissioned today to produce a work of art for a particular purpose, so also were Bezalel and Aholiab commissioned by God for a very specific work. Their commissioner was God Himself. Surely, no more noble commission could be imagined!

Secondly, these two men were filled with the Spirit, as it says in verse 3. This is the first time in the Bible that anyone is said to be filled with the Spirit of God, and it happens to two artists! These two artists are well named. As we know, names usually have a great significance in the Bible. Bezalel means “Under the shadow of God.” Aholiab means “The Father is my tent.” Certainly both of these names are well-chosen! For Bezalel comes under the shadow of the Holy Spirit's commissioning. Aholiab works on the tent of his heavenly Father.

Thirdly, notice what is required to be a good artist in verse 3: “in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship.” All of these things are required to be an excellent artist. Of course, these are the very things God Himself demonstrated in the creation of the world. As Proverbs 8 tells us, wisdom (personified as a woman) was present with God when He designed the creation, and in verse 30, Lady Wisdom describes herself as a master craftsman. It takes wisdom, insight, understanding, and skill to be a master artist. God had all of these things, and look at the stunning creation that He made! How very artistic it all is! One can find evidence of that everywhere. Psalm 8 says, “When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have ordained...” or Psalm 19: “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork.” There are not very many ways that we can imitate our Creator so directly as when we create works of art. What artists do is very similar to what God does in creation.

Of course, that can result in serious temptations for the artist to think of himself as God himself. For instance, Phil Ryken relates the story of Henri Matisse, after he had completed the paintings at the Chapel of the Rosary at Venice, stepped back from his work and said, “I did it for myself.” One of the Catholic nuns present overheard him and immediately objected, “But you told me you were doing it for God.” “Yes,” Matisse replied, “but I am God.” Ryken also notices how close this story of Bezalel and Aholiab is to the story of the golden calf, surely an example of art gone bad! So a good artist needs wisdom, understanding, craftsmanship, but also humility, and a desire that all the art he produces will redound to the glory of God, and not to the glory of himself.

Fourthly, notice the diversity of artistic gifts. This we see in two ways. Firstly, the head craftsmen Bezalel and Aholiab are given a very wide range of artistic gifts. They can work in wood, fabric, metal, precious stones, and even perfumes. So sometimes God gives many different artistic gifts to a single person. However, the gifts of God are also given to other people. Verse 6 shows us that these two men were not the only artists working on the tabernacle. The Lord put wisdom in the hearts of all the gifted artisans. It is very likely that these men and women were gifted in particular areas. They were just as important to the work of the tabernacle as Bezalel and Aholiab were. Two men by themselves surely could not have finished all the work that needed to be done. One can easily picture Bezalel and Aholiab instructing people in various patterns and then letting them do the copying.

The fifth thing to notice is that God commanded them what to make, and gave them the general idea of what the finished product would look like, but there was still some room for creative freedom. This is often how commissions are done even today. The commissioner tells the artist about the occasion, and the artist has freedom within those boundaries to create something appropriate for the occasion. We have seen what level of detail God gave to the artists, which is certainly quite a bit more detail than most modern-day commissions would have. This raises a very important point about creativity and boundaries. If an artist sets out to create something, but has no idea what will be created, that actually stifles creativity. Having no boundaries on the project is actually very inhibiting. It is much more productive to set very small and tight boundaries around the project. I remember writing a piece of music in college for organ pedal solo. That is a very limiting idea. What can you do creatively for just the feet on organ? Quite a lot, as it turned out, and I never wrote anything faster in my life. A lot of people today think that boundaries are bad things, and that they inhibit artistic freedom. Actually, boundaries are extremely healthy. There are many kinds of boundaries that are helpful, ranging from the law of God in the moral arena to the kinds of practical boundaries we have just discussed.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit that God gave to the artists reminds us that there was a very high purpose in all of this. We have noted already that God used this creative wisdom in creation. We have also, in our studies of the tabernacle, noted how many connections there are to the Garden of Eden, which can be regarded as the prototype of the tabernacle. This means that Bezalel and Aholiab were commissioned by God to create a new Garden of Eden, a portable and temporary Garden of Eden. They were the gardeners, if you will, of the tabernacle. They were inspired by God to be a new kind of Adam and Eve.

When we look into the New Testament to see where this all leads, we find an inescapable fact: Jesus Christ, as the new Adam, is creating a people for Himself that will be the ultimate temple, the bride of Christ, the church. Jesus' artistry in this creation is beyond our comprehension, for it factors in everything that happens to all Christians that changes them. There are so many various ways that God is doing this that it is mind-boggling. We cannot comprehend it all. But we do know that Jesus, the ultimate Artist equipped by the Holy Spirit, is making a work of art in the church that will be so gloriously beautiful in the new heavens and the new earth, that to say it will take your breath away is to understate the matter rather badly.

Is this how we see art? Art in America is difficult, for a variety of reasons. Firstly, America is a very pragmatic country. We are a "can do" nation. We want practicality, and the ability to do things. Now, is that bad? Of course not! Not in and of itself. It is wonderful to be able to do things that are practical. However, where Americans usually go wrong is in

assuming that this is all there is to life, and that anything not conducive to practicality is useless. We have spoken of this before. This attitude can be encapsulated most clearly in the frequently heard command, "Don't just sit there, do something!" Of course, it is a matter of wisdom to know when that is appropriate. It is often appropriate. We surely do not want to encourage laziness. However, if practicality is all we care about, we may be making it into an idol (such as busyness!), and we will usually turn into people who are very cynical about life, and who are so engaged in the moment, that the sweep of history and the possibilities of the future hold no interest for us. I would propose that there are moments when we need to turn the proverbial command on its head: "Don't just do something, sit there!" Of course, we mean not just sitting there for the sake of sitting and rest, though that can be a good refreshing thing as well, but also to meditate on things that are in God's Word, and in God's good creation. Otherwise, we might become, like Bilbo Baggins, too stretched and thin, like butter scraped over too much bread. Take time out, and overcome the tyranny of the urgent to consider things that are often just as important.

One thing that will help our discernment when it comes to art is to consider the relationship between beauty and truth. There are two extremes to avoid here. Many modern artists portray the world as it is, but without any beauty in it at all. This is why so much modern art is ugly. I remember seeing a sculpture in metal that looked much more like an alien spaceship crashing on the lawn than like anything that evoked meditative thoughts! Modern art is often concerned with telling it like it is, but without any hope that it might become better. Simply telling us how ugly the world is (deformed by sin!) is not going to help matters. We need a redemptive view of what is ugly. If Jesus can craft a beautiful church out of ugly (and yes, hypocritical!) people, then He can do the same thing with the whole world.

Many Christians, however, run to the opposite extreme, and I find this very commonly in the church today. They want to portray something beautiful, and yet it is not connected to this world in any way. Effectively, it denies the Fall and the ugliness that is in the world because of the Fall. You must pardon me if I step on any toes by bringing forth Thomas Kinkadee as an example of this. I am not judging anyone who likes Kinkadee's work. I used to like it myself. He describes his own work as "heaven on earth." But that is just the problem. Heaven is not on earth right now. It was in the beginning, and it will be in the end, but not right now. Most real artists would not be terribly complimentary of Kinkadee's work, even using words like "kitsch" to describe it. Surely there is room for artists to portray not only the world as we know it, but also the redemption that God is working in it through Jesus Christ, thus connecting truth to beauty. As a parallel example, we can look at music. There are Christians who believe that the only thing we should ever sing in church is lively, up-beat cheerful music. Now, it is quite true that we have much to be joyful about in the church. Salvation in Christ is something that we can sing about for eternity, and will. However, there are times when that just doesn't work. I remember Carl Trueman talking about this in a wonderful blog post on Reformation 21. The blog post was entitled "What can miserable Christians sing?" There are times when the cheerful feels so fake. There are times when we need to lament. And we do need to lament the sin that is in the world. There are minor key hymns that express these things. The book of Lamentations is in the Bible, after all, as are many of the sad Psalms, like Psalm 88. As the Psalmist says, how can we sing the songs of Zion if we are not in Zion? No, by the rivers of Babylon they wept.

The fact of the matter is simple: God gives gifts to all His children. They are all artistic, even the practical gifts. They weave together to form a beautiful tapestry. The most important

gift of all the gift of eternal life. The most amazing work of art is created when God changes a person from the inside out to start to look like Jesus. Has God done that work of art on your soul yet?