

I. Intro

A. Just over 25 years ago, I had a chance to hear Dr. Cornell West give a lecture as part of a distinguished lecture series at a local university. It was amazing at so many levels.

B. West is a brilliant and controversial academic. He has taught at Harvard and Princeton, written lots of books and been a high profile person - a leading public intellectual - for thirty years.

C. In retrospect, I now realize that the talk he gave thirty years ago was an attack on Western culture. I didn't realize that at the time. He was attacking capitalism and much of the establishment. What I remember most was his argument that the art of a poor, inner city girl should be celebrated as much as that of any dead, European male, but the museums are filled with the works of the dead European males.

D. I went to the microphone after his talk to ask a question as a way of pushing back. I planned to say that I'd come to hear him because he was a celebrated, very accomplished professor at Harvard, and that I had an 8 year old at home, and his art work was on the refrigerator, but didn't belong in a museum. But I chickened out because I feared for my physical safety. West had whipped the crowd into such a frenzy that I had no idea what they would do to me. And so I didn't ask my question. I mostly just marveled at the power of his rhetoric. I was profoundly jealous.

E. I bring that up today because I want to suggest that while an 8-year-old has dignity and should be encouraged, we are wrong to suggest that beauty is subjective. We are wrong to fail to see that there are objective truths and standards. These are very controversial points, but our inability to say that truth, beauty and goodness are real things is getting us into real trouble.

II. Next week we wrap up Exodus with a special, bring a friend to church day. We are going to look back at Exodus as an opportunity to better understand ourselves and our world.

A. It will not be weird or awkward. Among our highest goals for next Sunday are that:

1. Any friends you bring wants to come back.

2. And that if you did not invite a friend, you leave saying, "I really should have invited my Dad, my colleague, my daughter, whoever. I hope they do it again."

B. The sermon will – God-willing - be engaging, thoughtful, helpful, and surprising, and point to Jesus.

C. I have been inviting people. I hope you will join me.

D. Today we cover chapters 35-39 with a focus on beauty. That will make sense in a moment.

- III. Most of what we get in Exodus 35-39 is what we got in Exodus 25-31. Remember:
- A. Moses spent a lot of time on the mountain alone with God getting instructions on the tabernacle – this is the tent that would serve as the place of his presence on earth (later to be replaced by a permanent model which we call the Temple).
1. 12 of the 40 chapters in Exodus are given over to describing this building, which was to be located in the center of the community so that God would visibly live among them.
 2. It looks like this. (TWO PICTURES FROM EARLIER SERMONS)
- B. And we spent a lot of time looking at the building's design and the furniture and all the theology behind every aspect of this building: the altar, the veil, the ark of the covenant, the clothing for the priest, the fire and blood. We noted how they all pointed to God's holiness, to the costliness of sin and, ultimately, pointed to Jesus.
- C. We got a half dozen chapters of God giving instructions about the tabernacle to Moses – which was a lot. But then, before they took any steps to build it, they chased after the golden calf. Just after saying “yes” to God. “We want to enter into this special, exclusive covenant relationship with you. We want to be your people and represent you to the others.” Right after that they fell into gross idolatry.
1. We at least have the decency to make our idols not look like idols because we are better than they were. (That is not what I said. If you are find yourself thinking, “I’m better than they were. I’m a good person.” Or even, “Well, I’m a greedy selfish idiot, but at least I’m not as much of a greedy selfish idiot as they were, or as she is, or whoever,” then I’m not doing my job very well. The right response is not, “I’m great.” Or even, “I’m better than she is.” The right response when you look at someone else is not to be the pharisee in the parable of the pharisee and the tax collector that Jesus gives in Luke 18:9f
 2. The right response is to either see yourself as the tax collector. Or, when you look at someone whose life is so much of a dumpster fire that you are doing better, it’s to think, “there but for the grace of God go I.” (That was the 16th century John Bradford’s response when he saw someone being led to the gallows).
 3. In a world that celebrates self-esteem the message of deep sin is not popular. But it is necessary. The good news is only good news if you’ve gotten the bad news.
- D. Anyway, in chapters 35-39 there is a lot of repeat from the earlier description of tabernacle, only this time they actually build it. It seems like we’ve read this before because large sections are repeated verbatim – which:

1. doesn't make for the most interesting reading.
 2. And this leads scholars to put together all kinds of theories about why this section is repeated, such as the idea that there were two books of Exodus that were poorly merged together. That God did not inspire Moses to write the Pentateuch.
 3. One of the frustrations about a lot of what passes as Biblical scholarship is that the critics take the benefit of the doubt for their crazy theory, rather than reading it for what it is.
 4. As you may know, religion replaced theology in the academy. They are very different things. All the initial schools were started as Christian enterprises – focused on God and obedience.
 5. Religion is a very human focused discipline. One that is increasingly being viewed as an offshoot of anthropology.
- E. All of that aside, the text repeats itself because: they have a big do-over, and Jewish writing often repeats important points, and the repetition builds some tension into the story, with those reading it wondering,
1. Will they get it right this time?
 2. And will God show up when they are done? Will He move in?

IV. Exodus 35-39 sets up several ideas worth exploring:

- A. God's holiness. The design of the Tabernacle makes it clear that He is terrifyingly good.
- B. His faithfulness – even after the Jews major miss. He re-extends his faithful, steadfast love. This is so encouraging. So counter-intuitive. It is something you need to rehearse over and over. I have such a hard time believing God loves me when I fail.
- C. We see the need for and the benefits of obedience. This will be one of the rare moments in the Bible where the Jews did the right thing for the right reason.
- D. There is a lot here about the need – and the opportunity – to give.
 1. This section begins – chapter 35 – with a call for people to bring their gold and silver and the work of their hands – to the priests so the temple can be built.
 2. And they collect so much that the priests have to say, “Stop. No more gold and silver. We have too much already.”
 3. I would be remiss on this – the second to last week in our fiscal year - if I did not point out that we will likely make our budget, but we have not yet. We are not saying, “no more gold or silver. We have too much already.” We are saying, “please prayerfully considering helping us get to the finish line.”

E. In addition to stuff on God’s holiness and faithfulness and giving, there is also a celebration on work, which is one of the big areas of focus for Lakelight. This fall we will have our second Good Work Summit (Phil Yancy just confirmed as one of the presenters). Work is a get to. And God cares about what you do and how you do it and why.

F. There are a few themes we could pick up on from Exodus 35 – 39. I am going with beauty, because:

1. it is a big theme in Exodus;
2. and because it speaks to something we cannot afford to keep missing;
3. and because I have often missed it.

G. I spent time this week reading about beauty. The novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch has an essay on it, as does . There is much to be said about it. I feel like my views are undeveloped – in part because our tradition has done little with it.

1. I sometimes study at Saint Mary’s at the Lake – the Catholic seminary in Mundelein. I go there because it is quiet, but also because it is exceptionally beautiful. The ceiling in the library is spectacular. I am sure it cost several hundred thousand dollars to paint. Which an earlier version of me would have looked down upon. Paint it beige and give the money to care for the poor or feed the hungry or reach the lost. Which I get, but which I think occasionally misses the point.

H. I was drawn:

1. To Matthew’s account of Jesus in [Matthew 26:6–13](#), which describes Jesus at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper when a woman came up to him with an alabaster flask of expensive perfume and pours it on his head. And the disciples saw this they were indignant, saying it was a waste, because it could have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor.

a) The text then reads that Jesus said to them: Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.” And then he goes on to note that she was preparing his body for burial.

2. And to Psalm 27: 4 One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.

3. And in 2 Chron. 3:16f we get descriptions of two columns – with their decorations – that serve no structural purpose.

4. And then in our text – which I am about to read - there are many places in the description of the Tabernacle where it is clear that God is focused on making it beautiful.

5. In his book on hope, NT Wright writes, “Beauty matters. Dare I say, almost as much as spirituality and justice.”

6. Robert George, another leading public intellectual – and ironically, a friend with Cornell West (they have radically different views on just about everything, but have maintained a life-time friendship) – by the way, we have George coming in this fall for a Lakelight lecture. He writes that beauty is ennobling. That ugly tears us down.

7. Let me read for you part of Exodus 35:20-27 and then make four observations about beauty.

V. Exodus 35:20f

A. Then the whole Israelite community withdrew from Moses’ presence,²¹ and everyone who was willing and whose heart moved them came and brought an offering to the Lord for the work on the tent of meeting, for all its service, and for the sacred garments.²² All who were willing, men and women alike, came and brought gold jewelry of all kinds: brooches, earrings, rings and ornaments. They all presented their gold as a wave offering to the Lord.²³ Everyone who had blue, purple or scarlet yarn or fine linen, or goat hair, ram skins dyed red or the other durable leather brought them.²⁴ Those presenting an offering of silver or bronze brought it as an offering to the Lord, and everyone who had acacia wood for any part of the work brought it.²⁵ Every skilled woman spun with her hands and brought what she had spun—blue, purple or scarlet yarn or fine linen.²⁶ And all the women who were willing and had the skill spun the goat hair.²⁷ The leaders brought onyx stones and other gems to be mounted on the ephod and breastpiece.

B. What we are told – without being told – is that there is a concern for the aesthetic. That this building needs to be beautiful. We are not getting a description of a purely utilitarian structure.

C. You might remember that it’s a bit unclear whether Moses is in heaven when he meets with God or looking into heaven. And whether he is looking at a model or a real building in heaven. But, the suggestion is that Heaven is beautiful

1. I’m starting to study heaven again in advance of the fall series. And some claim that there are more colors in heaven. Or that we are able to see more of the light spectrum. Wouldn’t it be fun to see some new colors added to the palate.

VI. What can be said about beauty?

A. It is worth noting that beauty is important to God.

1. He might have made things bland and boring. We can imagine a world in black and white. That is not the world he created. That is not the design of the tabernacle he has given us.
2. His home is not just functional. We get all of this about gold and colors and precious gems. The implication is that the focus on the beauty of the Tabernacle wasn't merely for aesthetic pleasure; it was making a statement about God and what He values.
3. We could say the same about the beauty of creation. It tells us things about the Creator. The intricate details of a flower, the grandeur of a mountain range, the vastness of the night sky—all these reflect the artistry of God.
4. In Romans 1:20 Paul says: "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse."
5. Beauty is important to God.

B. We could argue that beauty is an attribute of God. He is beautiful. In Psalms 27:4, David expresses a desire to "gaze upon the beauty of the Lord."

C. It is worth noting that beauty is an intrinsic good. There are things – like money or power – that are good for something. You serve a higher purpose. They are not a means within themselves. Some things are good in themselves.

VII. I want to make three different points:

A. Beauty is objective.

1. I do think standards of beauty change from culture to culture and from age to age. Defining it precisely is hard, one of those tasks like herding cats or nailing Jell-O to a tree. There are many definitions.
2. But, I am pushing back on the idea that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. I want to say, beauty is defined by God. I believe Jonathan Edwards was right when he argued that beauty is the reality that overcomes subjectivism.

3. A few months ago, I mentioned that my car was stolen – from our home in Lake Bluff. Right out of our driveway.
- a) I talked about how confused I was, standing in the driveway trying to remember what I had done with the car.
 - b) I mentioned that we got it back, but it was totaled because they had driven it so fast.
 - c) And I mentioned that I was more bothered by the fact that he threw my books out the window and into a puddle
 - d) What kind of disordered soul does this person have.
4. I find myself thinking the same way about many things I see. I went to an art exhibit a while back. And the art was ugly. Almost all of it
- a) And in the past, when I have seen this I have thought, I don't get it.
 - b) Now, to be clear, not all art needs to be beautiful. Not all music needs to be happy.
 - c) This world is beautiful but broken. We need art and music to reflect both.
 - d) But, that is different from calling ugly beautiful.

B.

C.

D.

E. Jesus and the Gospel are beautiful

1. Isaiah 53 tells us that "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." I rather think that was a description of Jesus on the cross.
2. But, whatever, my point is, Christ's sacrificial love reveals a deep beauty— God's love for humanity.
3. You may have heard the phrase “the beauty that will save the world.” Solzhenitsyn made it famous, but it came from Dostoevsky’s novel, *The Idiot*, which is about a prince that has some physical and emotional challenges that lead everyone to think he is stupid – slow, not all there – but he is, and as the novel goes on you realize that he is thoughtful and patient and kind in a world where few are. And they scoff at his belief that “beauty will save the world.” And then eventually realize that he thinks that because he is a Christian.
4. Let’s be clear. That is not the claim. Beauty will not save the world – but God values beauty. He is beautiful. Beauty is an intrinsic good – and the work of Jesus (the gospel itself) is beautiful.
5. And we need to see that.
6. In a world that is so increasingly lost and confused we need to lean into beauty.

F. We need more beauty in our lives

1. We need more beauty – because it helps order our heart and helps us more fully love and follow the Lord

VIII. Let me end with the words of Psalm 27:

A. One thing I ask from the Lord,
this only do I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to gaze on the beauty of the Lord
and to seek him in his temple.