

September Series: Living Creatively

“A Church for Starving Artists”

Exodus 31:1-11 & John 6:25-35

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The most famous artist in the Bible is a character most of us have never heard of. His creation is more famous than St. Peter’s Cathedral in the Vatican. His commission was to direct a project more magnificent than Notre Dame in Paris, more spiritually significant than the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.¹ Steven Spielberg and George Lucas directed and produced a movie about his handiwork.

His name was Bezalel² and he was the son of Uri, the grandson of Hur, the great-grandson of Caleb³ from the tribe of Judah – the most blessed of the twelve tribes of Israel.⁴ But most of us have never heard of him.

In the ancient days, the Israelites believed that God was active but generally distant from them. Even Moses had to climb up to the top of Mount Sinai in order to meet God. But the people wanted God to be with them all the time and everywhere.

And so God directed Moses to have the Israelites build a portable temple that they could carry with them as they traveled through the wilderness toward the Promised Land. The temple itself was not God, but it symbolized God’s presence with them.

And this portable temple, this portable shrine was meant to be **magnificent**, something worthy of God, something breathtakingly holy and gorgeous and unique. In fact, God personally dictated the plans for this project – everything from the colors and metals to be used, to the dimensions. And God personally chose the project directors. God called them by name.

Leading the team was an artist named Bezalel – the DaVinci of the Late Bronze Age – who was a master craftsman with thread, wood, precious metals, and fine gems.⁵ And with him was an even lesser known man named Oholiab who hailed from a tribe of judges.⁶ Oholiab was “an engraver, designer, and embroiderer.”⁷ And together they led a team of “all the skillful,” men and women⁸, supervising them and teaching them as they created together the means by which God would always be with them.

¹ The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is built over one of the possible sites where Jesus was buried.

² Today there is a college on Mt. Scopus in Jerusalem called the Bezalel Academy of Art.

³ 1 Chronicles 2:18-20.

⁴ Genesis 49:8-12.

⁵ Exodus 36:10-39:43 gives more details about Bezalel and Oholiab’s work.

⁶ Oholiab was of the tribe of Dan which comes from the Hebrew word “to judge.” See Genesis 49:16.

⁷ Exodus 38:23.

⁸ Exodus 35:25-26.

The plans were extraordinary, coached by God’s own voice, as told to Moses. The shrine would have three parts, each holier than the other. The very center of the shrine – also called a tabernacle – was the holiest part. And inside that holiest part – the holy of holies – would be would three gold pieces of furniture: a table, a lamp stand, and a fancy box. But this box was not just decorative. It wasn’t your average storage container.

This box would forever be called the ark of the covenant.⁹ And once it was finished, it would carry the stone tablets Moses brought down from Mount Sinai, the tablets on which The Ten Commandments had been written.

This ark would be attached to two long poles for easier carrying. And on top of the ark there would be a golden lid also called the “mercy seat”¹⁰ decorated with an angel spreading its wings on each end.¹¹

The Hebrew word for mercy seat is *kap-po-reth* and it means “a cover” but it’s not the same word that you would use for a mere “lid.” *Kap-po-reth* implies “covering one’s debt” or “covering one’s sin” and it’s only used in Scripture when talking about this particular lid, the mercy seat.

It was believed that the mercy seat – this lid that covered human debts, human sins – was the footstool of God. When the Israelites stopped along their spiritual journey from slavery to promised freedom, when they set up this mobile sanctuary along the way – it was believed that this mercy seat was the base of the throne of God.

The people could not see God. They couldn’t even see the awesome throne of God. But they could see God’s footstool.

Now think about this for a moment. This was the container that held the Ten Commandments. Maybe we look upon the Ten Commandments as a list of strict rules about what we can and cannot do. We are **not** to commit adultery. We are **not** to lie. We **are** to honor the Sabbath Day. We **are** to honor our parents. This is God’s list of the most important “dos” and “don’ts” of life.

But the Ten Commandments are clearly something more: they are a tool of mercy. They are the laws that set us free. They clarify what God wants of us, how we are supposed to treat God and each other. They symbolize our covenant, our basic life agreement with God.

God’s end of the deal is this: God will lead us. God will give us all we need for this journey. God will set us free from our oppressors and lead us toward a promised place. But our end of the bargain is to follow these ten simple laws. These laws were laid

⁹ The ark and the table were made of acacia wood with gold overlay. The lamp stand was solid gold.

¹⁰ The hymn “Come, Ye Disconsolent” mentions a mercy seat in verse 1.

¹¹ Exodus 25:17

out not to stifle our lives but to protect us from a way of life that is opposed to what God wants for us.

Think of it this way: good parents set boundaries for their children. Loving parents teach their children . . .

to eat healthy foods,
not to cross the street without looking both ways,
to keep their fingers out of light sockets and the mouths of strange dogs in the neighborhood,
to share their toys.

Good parents aren't trying to control their children with these rules. They are trying to protect them, to show them a better way to live.

Following the Ten Commandments protects us and shows us a better way to live. And these commandments were so sacred that they were to be stored in this golden box called an ark – with a golden lid – called a “mercy seat” where the Israelites believed they could come to meet God for whatever they needed whenever they wanted along their life's journey.

And here's another amazing thing about the ark of the covenant. The Bible tells us that, before this gorgeous tabernacle could be built by Bezalel and Oholiab and their apprentices, they would need materials.

And so there was a free will offering taken up every day in order to create this tabernacle. Every morning, someone came around and took up a collection. They collected the most precious items the Israelites had on them: their gold, their silver, their bronze trinkets, their animal skins and their fine clothes, wood, oil, perfume, jewels, whatever was needed.¹²

And apparently, the Israelites gave very generously, because a day came when they didn't need to collect any more. The Israelites had been so generous, had given so much that Moses had to restrain the people from giving any more. They had given so much of their wealth and their treasures that the artisans had more than enough to complete their creation.¹³

This is how much they wanted God near them. This is how much they wanted God with them all the time. They would give anything to have God close to them, traveling with them in the wilderness. They would even give their most precious possessions.

¹² Scripture tells us that before the Israelites left Egypt, they asked the Egyptians for their fine clothing, gold, and jewelry, which is why they had these things in the wilderness. See Exodus 12:35-36.

¹³ Exodus 36:5-7.

Today, we might laugh at these primitive Israelites who believed that God was with them because they literally had the Ten Commandments with them, because they were going to build a footstool for God on top of the box that would carry those commandments.

Didn't they know that God is always with us? Didn't they know that they didn't need a mobile temple? They didn't need a temple at all!

Actually . . . no, they did not know this. All through the Old Testament – the Hebrew scriptures – there are indications that God was with them all the time. But they believed it was important to build something tangible to represent God's presence.

Today many of us know God is with us because of Jesus.

For those of us who believe that Jesus was and is Emmanuel which means "God with us,"¹⁴ for those of us who believe that God's Spirit has been with us because Jesus said so,¹⁵ the notion of believing that God is with a group of people because they are carrying a golden box around sounds ridiculous. But this story speaks to the fact that they longed for God to be with them as they traveled on their journey. They wanted God with them so desperately, that they would give whatever it took to make it happen.

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Bezelel and Oholiab worked diligently on this project.¹⁶ And while they were at it, they would also create the vestments that the priests would wear – robes made with gold and blue and purple and crimson yarns, decorated with fine gems. If we keep reading in Exodus, we'll find that it took nine months for the project to be completed.¹⁷

No one knows whatever happened to that portable tabernacle. Nobody knows what happened to the ark of the covenant, unless you believe Raiders of the Lost Ark, that it's packed away in a government warehouse someplace. Doubtful.

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On this Labor Day weekend, as we remember the work of our hands and heads and hearts, as we remember the work of so many trying to bring comfort and protection to those ravaged by Hurricane Katrina, I want us to think especially about artists.

Do you remember the Willie Nelson song "*Mama Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys*"? Parents generally don't want their children to grow up to be artists either. Willie Nelson advises that we encourage our children to be "*doctors and lawyers*"

¹⁴ Matthew 1:23.

¹⁵ John 14:16-17, 25-26.

¹⁶ The shrine was built with three distinct zones: the most sacred where the gold table, gold lamp stand and gold ark stood, the next most sacred where a bronze basin and altar stood, and the third a court surrounding the other zones. See Exodus 25:1 – 27:21.

¹⁷ Exodus 40:17.

and such.” We want for them – and for ourselves – a prosperity that comes with a steady income and job security.

But the truth is that many cowboys have done quite well for themselves. Gene Autry was a billionaire. At least one cowboy has been President.¹⁸

And being an artist is not a bad way to live. In fact, being an artist is **essential** for whatever we are and whatever we do. We must pray that our children become artists. In fact, if you ask the average First Grader if he or she is an artist, the child would say, “Yes!” But as we grow older, we forget. We forget that being creative is part of life.

Years ago in seminary, I had a friend (who was not in seminary) who worked as an architect and a sculptor. He was not a Christian. And one day as I was admiring his art, he asked me what kind of creative things I was doing in my work. I was feeling overwhelmed and frustrated in the middle of seminary exams. And so I said, “Well, I’m not really very creative these days.”

I’ll never forget the look he gave me. He looked stunned and very disappointed. And then he said, “Well, you must not be very much of a minister then.”

And he was right. To serve in any capacity, in any setting and try to do it without imagination and vitality is not only a poor excuse for service; it is also offensive to the God who made us.

Everybody – from sanitation workers to Fortune 10 CEOs – can be creative on the job. Everyone has the opportunity to be artistic, even if it’s only in our attitudes.

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Jesus of course was an artist, and by that, I don’t necessarily mean that he carved expressive pieces out of olive wood to display on somebody’s table. I mean that **he was creative and passionate about his work**, even if all he ever built were the most ordinary shelves. Jesus was a carpenter. But he lived the life of an artist because he had a passion that perfectly glorified the One who created the heavens and the earth.

Seona Reid is the Principal of the Glasgow School of Art in Scotland. And she when she gave the graduation address to her students in 2004, she said this:

Artists are simply people who are passionate enough to imagine things that do not yet exist.

<p>This was Jesus’ life work. He not only was passionate enough to imagine a world that did not yet exist. He had a name for it: the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of</p>
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¹⁸ I was thinking about Ronald Reagan, but actually Dwight D. Eisenhower was inducted into the Cowboy Hall of Fame before he died.

God. It was a place, a realm where the world would be more like what God created it to be.

One of the reasons parents worry about their children growing up to be artists is that we're all aware of the term "starving artists." Creative people with a passion for music and painting and acting and sculpture often struggle, in worldly terms, to the point that they are barely making it.

Sometimes artists starve because they don't make enough money to buy food. And other times they starve because they have imagined a different world, and that world is clearly not imminent. They need to eat. And they need to eat something that feeds their souls.

My friends, this is what the church is supposed to be. We are supposed to be a community where empty souls are fed as surely as empty stomachs are fed, where people who are passionate enough to imagine things that do not yet exist can find the bread of life. The church is supposed to be a haven for starving artists, and that would include any of us who long for a different way of living our lives, hungry for the Kingdom of Heaven.

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The theme for worship this month is Living Creatively. But this is also a month when we begin a new program year with the church and we dive into a new season and work and in school.

But before we begin to fill our calendars with a schedule that spiritually depletes us, maybe we can find – in scripture – a path that keeps us focused on "performing the works of God." Maybe we can come to a place where we realize that:

God has called us by name,

God has instilled a passion in us to become servants through which God might create something magnificent.

God has asked us to freely and generously give what is precious to us so that something amazing might be built.

not an ark, not a portable shrine but **a world** – a world God imagined at creation, a world described by Jesus as the Kingdom of Heaven, a world in which nobody lives in misery, in which people share what they have, a world in which we live exactly the way God created us to live.

But it's exhausting to work on this artistic project. We find ourselves starving for something that endures. And so we are invited to come to the mercy seat, to the footstool of God. We are invited to gather together for something that gives us life. This is our calling: to be a church for starving artists, to be a community where empty stomachs are

fed *and* where passions are fed and the passionate find nourishment for their dreams, for **God's** dreams of what the world might be.

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Clearly this week, dreams have been shattered and people have literally been starving and thirsty and sick with the disastrous hurricane along the Gulf States. We have the extraordinary opportunity here to feed our neighbors to the south, to help provide for their most basic needs.

Many of you have a passion to do something. The images we've seen this week show a misery that is not what God intends for **any** of his children. If you are moved, **if you feel this passion**, if you **get** that we are not just the Church for ourselves; we are the Church for **all** God's children, then listen: God is calling our names for a new project, to create something beautiful so that **God's name** might be praised and God's children might find mercy.

If you know this passion, if you can imagine a different kind of world, then you are also one of God's artists. **What glorious project is God asking you to lead today?**

If God has fed you today, go out and feed someone else. If you are in need of consolation, come to the mercy seat and kneel at the footstool of God. And may we all realize that **we are the artists God has created** to make life beautiful and not just for ourselves.

Let us pray:

We come, O LORD to your footstool remembering that, in spite of all despair, in spite of all brokenness earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal. Make us creative participants in your healing work, we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.