**October 24, 2021 22nd Sunday after Pentecost**

**Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church**

**Isaiah 65:17-19, 25 Exodus 31:1-11**

**The Art of Faith**

**Douglas T. King**

Maybe it needs some purple. Yes. And a swoosh of purple slides from the brush and across the canvas. Who is up next? My turn. I think it needs some red polka dots. Brilliant splashes of vermillion are repeatedly plonked.

My wife Marta and I have a fun tradition we have done with our friends over the years. When we invite folks over for dinner we set up an easel with a canvas and lay out a plethora of paints and brushes. While we have cocktails everyone is invited to pick up a brush, find a color they like and participate in transforming that blank canvas into a cacophony of color, movement, and energy. As we take turns at the easel we also periodically turn the canvas ninety degrees to gain a new perspective on our collective efforts. By the end of the evening what has been created may not exactly be a masterpiece. But the canvasses do adorn the walls of many of our friends’ homes. They are a reminder of a lovely evening and the great joy there is to be found in the act of creation, particularly the collective act of creation.

Our text from Exodus this morning tells of the creation of the Ark of the Covenant, a portable dwelling place fashioned as a home for the divine as the Israelites continued their journey through the wilderness. We learn of the two people who have been called to create the tabernacle, Bezalel and Oholiab. And we hear of the first time, the very first time, someone is filled with the Holy Spirit. God tells Moses of Bezalel, “I have filled him with divine spirit…”

The artist, Makoto Fujimura notes that the first person filled with the Holy Spirit, is not one of the patriarchs of the Israelites, Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, or even the prophet Moses. The first person God imbues with the Holy Spirit is an artisan who has been called to create a work of art worthy to house the holiness of God. At first this may surprise us but with further thought this entirely makes sense. Our call to worship this morning was a portion of the first creation story in Genesis. God is the original artist. The very first thing the Bible reveals about the divine is that God creates.

But we would be mistaken if we limited God’s creative action to the initial fashioning of the universe. God continues to create and will continue to create. Our first lesson from the book of Isaiah shares the promises of God to an exiled people seeking to rebuild their lives. God does not offer some small consolation. God offers a radical transformation of all creation, an imaginative re-envisioning of existence itself. “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox…”

 If we turn to the very end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation, we hear “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God…” The entire Biblical narrative is bookended, framed by talk of God’s creative action. It is the first and last thing the Bible wants us to know about God.

The divine does not merely sustain creation, or even promise to solely repair creation. God is ever in the business of new creation. And that creating of the new includes you and me. Think of the text from Second Corinthians we often use as part of our Assurance of Forgiveness, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

Sometimes we think too small when we envision how God is at work in the world. We imagine that God is solely trying to fix what is broken. We need to imagine, bigger, deeper, wider than that. After all, resurrection is not some minor adjustment, it is a reinvention of the rules of mortality. It is a radical remaking of existence. God does not journey around the world with a tool box and a roll of duct tape, patching things together. God is not in the minor repair business. God is in the transformation business. God is an artist, the master creator, thinking outside the box and beyond the farthest limits of our imagination. And each of us is blessed to be a part of the remarkable masterpiece being created. What a privileged place for the likes of you and me to be.

But that is not all. If we return to that Genesis text of course we are reminded of God’s creative handiwork but we are also told that we are created in the image of God. This means that we too are called to be creators, to be artists of our own. Fujimura argues that when we are creative we are playing a part in God’s ultimate creation.

We certainly see that at play in how Bezalel is gifted with the Holy Spirit that he might create the Ark of the Covenant. The Jewish scholar, Avivah Zornberg, believes that this act of imbuing Bezalel with the divine spirit and calling him to create is a vital antidote to the previous history of the nation of Israel. She reminds us of the time Israel spent in slavery in Egypt and the mindless, mind-numbing, deadening, and repetitive task of brickmaking. One of the reasons it was so challenging for Moses to convince the people to seek their own freedom was because that mindless repetition had robbed them of their imagination. They were trapped in a box that denied them their creativity. They could not imagine any other life than the one of slavery in which they were trapped. And they could not imagine a God that was powerful enough to free them from their captivity.

Their liberation from slavery and subsequent journey through the wilderness was a time for them to not just be freed from the slavery of the Egyptians but from the limits placed upon their imagination and thus on their ability to understand God and God’s creative work in the world. Their collective imagination was being revived, enlivened, brought back to life.

This act of creation of the Ark of the Covenant, by Bezalel, and the entire nation who were all asked to contribute, serves not just to create a home for God’s holiness in their midst but the ability of the people of Israel to imagine and recognize the presence of God’s holiness.

Faith is not solely a left brain proposition of assenting to a set of theological precepts about God. It is also requires the use of our right brain. We need our imaginations to be fertile and active if we are going to begin to comprehend our God who is beyond every category and boundary we understand as limited mortals. Sometimes we need to shift the canvas ninety degrees to recognize the divine in our midst.

Of course not all of us are going to be master sculptors or painters of masterpieces. But there are so many ways we can be creative, we can engage in art. Our music program is a remarkable gift of the arts that inspires us each and every week. When we sing hymns together we collectively create art. And we engage in art when we experience it as well as when we create it. Listening to the choir perform an anthem is an invitation to our imagination. This weekend’s Art and Faith Festival both demonstrated that we do indeed have artists in our midst and gave us the opportunity to experience art. The ways we can engage in art are endless. Arranging flowers in a vase is a creative act of art. As is doodling on scrap of paper, or planting a garden, or writing a poem, or anything we do creatively and thoughtfully. Every time we worship together we are creating art. Kierkegaard taught us that worship is a performance art piece in which we all participate, performing for our God. We are creating art this very moment. We are engaged in the collective act of creation. There are endless opportunities to use the muscle of our imagination and thus be more open to recognizing God’s holiness in our midst.

From the most accomplished and gifted artists to those of us with let us say less than classical ability, we are all in the same boat in God’s eyes. There is no need to worry over perfection. All of our artistic efforts, like all of our efforts in life, are imperfect until God, the ultimate artist, completes them.

So let us not be shy in our engagement with art. Let us allow our imaginations to run wild. Our God is not merely at work repairing what is broken. Our God is constantly creating and recreating in ways beyond our comprehension, and that new creation blessedly includes us. Let us join in the creation and perhaps catch a glimpse of God at work in our midst.

Maybe your life needs a swoosh of purple or a few red polka dots.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Fujimura, Makoto, *Art and Faith,* Yale University Press,

 New Haven, 2020.

Zornberg, Avivah, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflectons on*

 *Exodus,* Doubleday, New York, 2001.