

March 10, 2024

Rev. Carrie Winebrenner

Exodus 35:4-19, 22-35

“Enriching Our Faith Through the Arts”

As the continuation of the scripture is read and the Word is proclaimed, I invite you to remember that “you are an artist, created to create.” As you entered the worship space, you should have been given a paper butterfly and the choice of three colored markers.

I invite you to take hold of those butterflies, listen to the Word of God as it comes to you today, and begin creating your art...by coloring, drawing, smearing, mixing, creating...

You are an artist, created to create. Free your mind, and let your art be your prayer.

The continuation of Exodus 35:22-35, Common English Bible

²² Both men and women came forward. Everyone who was eager to participate brought pins, earrings, rings, and necklaces, all sorts of gold objects. Everyone raised an uplifted offering of gold to the LORD. ²³ And everyone who had blue or purple or deep red yarn or fine linen or goats’ hair or rams’ skins dyed red or beaded leather brought them.

²⁴ Everyone who could make a gift offering of silver or copper brought it as the LORD’s gift offering. Everyone who had acacia wood that could be used in any kind of building work brought it. ²⁵ All the skilled people spun cloth with their hands, and brought what they had spun in blue and purple and deep red yarns and fine linen. ²⁶ All those who were eager to use their skill spun the goats’ hair.

²⁷ The chiefs brought gemstones and gems to be set in the priest’s vest and the chest pendant, ²⁸ spices and oil for light and for the anointing oil, and for the sweet-smelling incense. ²⁹ All the Israelite folks who were eager to contribute something for the work that the LORD had commanded Moses to do brought it as a spontaneous gift to the LORD.

Moses introduces Bezalel and Oholiab

³⁰ Then Moses said to the Israelites: “Look, the LORD has chosen Bezalel, Uri’s son and Hur’s grandson from the tribe of Judah. ³¹ The LORD has filled him with the divine spirit that will give him skill, ability, and knowledge for every kind of work. ³² He will be able to create designs, do metalwork in gold, silver, and copper, ³³ cut stones for setting, carve wood, do every kind of creative work, ³⁴ and he will have the ability to teach others.

Both he and Oholiab, Ahisamach’s son from the tribe of Dan, ³⁵ have been given the skill to do every kind of work done by a gem cutter or a designer or a needleworker in blue, purple, and deep red yarns and in fine linen or a weaver or anyone else doing work or creating designs.

This is the creative Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Let us pray.

O God, whom saints and angels delight to worship in heaven: Be ever present with your children who seek through art and drama and music to perfect the praises offered by your people on earth; send your Spirit over us and grant us even now glimpses of your beauty and make us worthy to behold it unveiled for evermore; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Last Sunday after the matinee for The Prom, I struck up a conversation with one of the actors. I asked if they were enjoying being part of the cast, and they replied, “yes! You know the director couldn’t cast me in all of the lead roles, so he had to cast me in the ensemble.”

“He had to cast me in the ensemble.”

I’ve been thinking about this comment all week. As actors, we are most proud when we land the lead roles, or at least a named character part. But this actor was so excited, so proud, so grateful to be part of the ensemble. It reminded me of my high school drama teacher who beat into our heads that “there are no small parts, only small actors.”

This lesson doesn’t only apply to the theater; it also rings true for the Israelites. In our passage today, we only have three named parts. Moses is serving as director, actor, and producer. Our two supporting roles are our technical directors and costumers. And we are then left with an entire community of ensemble members. Everyone played a role in the tabernacle production.

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All the Israelite folks who were eager to contribute something for the work that the LORD had commanded Moses to do brought it as a spontaneous gift to the LORD.” For truly, there were no small parts, only small actors.

Everyone who wanted to be part, was. Everyone. Whether an expert or a complete amateur, whether working as a team to build a set, create a new world on a stage, working

together to create a parish art show, or putting in hours upon hours of practice time to learn not only the notes on the staff but how your notes complement into the spiritual harmony of the entire choir...everyone was the ensemble; there are no small parts.

It is not often that a Scripture passage not only teaches us to value the arts, but also shows us how to be artists within a community. Moses couldn't do it alone. Even Bezalel and Oholiab who were called up by God, given the Spiritual gifts of divine art, could not have built this alone.

Imagine a play written, directed, designed, built, costumed, produced, marketed, ushered, and applauded by one single person.

Now imagine a one-person music series concert. No, thank you.

And even in the visual arts, where one artist spends perhaps years on one work of art, they do not dream it alone. Behind every artist of every kind is an ensemble of folks who train, who inspire, who aid, who feed, who encourage, who comfort, who purchase, who endow, who appreciate, and who befriend.

This church has a legacy of celebrating the arts as not only beauty, but as ministry. Generations of our ensemble members have given countless hours to training, inspiring, aiding, feeding, encouraging, endowing, appreciating, and befriending drama, music, visual, culinary, dance, woodworking, writing, artists.

Last year, Annie led a sermon series on different ways to pray, one of which is prayer as art. Our faith, our Bible, lifts up the arts as a way to not only pray to enrich our faith. And today, we are doing just that...and in grand fashion.

In just a moment, we will be dedicating a new outlet given to the arts ministry of First Presbyterian Church. I don't want to give too many spoilers, but soon all will be revealed.

Then, during our offering time, you will be given the opportunity to bring your butterflies forward as a contribution to our dwelling place in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Because like our scriptural ensemble, "Everyone who was eager to participate brought..."

Should you be more comfortable, I also invite you to leave your butterfly in the offering plates as they are passed.

After worship, we're invited to the art gallery to meet and learn about our currently displayed artist, Lee Rainboth. Lee is not only an artist and executive director of the Fort Wayne Dance Collective, but Lee also makes it his mission to cultivate an ensemble of artists from Haiti. You see, the art work in the gallery is not created by a singular person, but an entire community of "no small parts." It is stunning, and it is an inspiration for how we are all called to co-create together.

But our co-creating prayers continue, as if by design, as this Wednesday's Lenten series, Seeking the Heart of God in the Heart of the City 2.0, is all about the arts in our community.

But like the delicate art of infomercials...yeah, I admit that's a stretch...but wait, there's more. Today, as we enrich our faith through the arts, as we all spend this time as artists, we also lift up "everyone who could make a gift offering" as we are joined by the ensemble of our theatre production of "The Prom."

Usually, we would ask them to come down front so you can see and watch their performance. But today, like our chancel choir, they are not performing, as they are not actors. These folks, many of whom have never been in this sanctuary, are here giving, sharing with us their prayer through their time, their talents, their vocal treasures, their theatrical tabernacle.

So instead, I have asked them to sing from the choir balcony, not to hide their faces, but to uplift their message, to raise their worship, to give this entire room to them to pray with their words. With no distractions. Their message is deep, their medium is God-given, and their ability to inspire as an ensemble, as one voice, is nothing short of awe-inspiring.

I am so deeply grateful for being called to a church that not only supports but breathes the arts. I am grateful that we affirm that the arts are not pretty...but they are Spiritual. I am grateful that this church shares, trains, inspires, aids, feeds, encourages, comforts, endows, appreciates, and befriends the arts not as entertainment, but as prayer.

I am also grateful for today. For this group of people, this church, this community...those who will speak, will sing, will write, will color, will pray...for this ensemble of artists, is the creative Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.