
THE CURRENT

The Art of the Gospel

- March/April 2024 -





Christianity through Art

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...Prince of Peace.

From the Pastor's Desk

Anyone who has studied art history can't deny the impact Christianity has had on art throughout the years. All of the great masters such as Leonardo da Vinci, Caravaggio, Raphael, and Michelangelo have tried their hand at telling the stories of Scripture through their respective mediums. From frescos to mosaics, or sculptures to illustrated manuscripts, art and Christianity have been linked together since the earliest days of the church. For many people, how they think about the story of God comes from images they've seen in stained glass or an illustrated Bible like the one I had growing up.

Art has a unique way of helping us connect to stories that feel so different than our own. It transports us back into history and humanizes characters that can at times seem larger than life. Art helps us see the emotion of a moment and teaches us to slow down as we read these ancient stories. It is a tool that reminds us that what we are reading isn't a manufactured legend, but truth that still speaks to us today.

Artists are just like pastors, they are far from perfect. Not every piece communicates to everyone. Some works distort the stories in ways that aren't helpful. At its worst, art can be offensive and repulsive, not unlike ourselves at our lowest moments. But at its best, art can transport us places that remind us of God's love and grace. Art can lift us up to the heavens and can also bring us to the foot of the cross. In this issue, we explore the impact art can have when it illuminates the Gospel.

- *Justin Fluhr*



I See Red

We must realize that He is the Creator, the Artist, the Master, and we are His brush strokes.

Many years ago, my wife Dawn and I attended a very special night with the Steven Curtis Chapman family. This was a limited attendance intimate night of song and story about their struggle and healing over the last year. This was just one year after the loss of their beautiful daughter Maria Sue.

In May 2008, Maria Sue died from injuries and blood loss after being struck by their vehicle as it slowly was moved into the family driveway by brother Will Franklin Chapman, then 17. She had run, unseen, in front of the SUV.

They talked about the challenge of mourning the death of their daughter and being there for their son, Will, as he healed and mourned. They talked about how most families will deal with one or the other, but they had to deal with both and at the same time.

Shortly after Steve and Mary Beth Chapman spoke about that day's incidents, out walks Will. Despite all of the tears and sniffles in the room, there was complete silence as he walked out. All I could think of was the amount of courage, healing, and faith he must have had to be able to come before the 100 people in attendance.

As Will began to speak, his parents interjected how Will and Maria Sue had an extremely special bond. If Will was home, Maria Sue was right there with him. Rather it was doing homework, at dinner time around the table, or just watching TV, they were inseparable.

Will walked us through the first 24 hours after losing his best friend and sister. The emotional roller-coaster. How he would swing from sadness to anger at himself, to remorse, to anger at God, to laughing at a fond memory, and then right back to anger.

As night began to fall, the anger began shifting to rage. Rage against God. So much so that he could literally see red! At some point he just stormed out of the door and “had it out” with God on the back porch. Mary Beth reflects on that moment realizing the pain and struggle he was having while trying to console the other kids, her husband, and herself. She wanted so badly to take away the pain he was going through, but it was all she could do to maintain her composure with all she already had. Steven chimes in recalling the vocabulary he had of adult words he didn’t think he knew. Will chuckled through his tears as he took a deep breath. He expounded how that was definitely not his best moment, but he knew he could not keep it all in and heal. Steven continued saying, he knew those words quite well at that time and God was receiving them all! Then suddenly, Steven says, as though the world had stopped again, there was absolute silence on the back porch.

Will picks back up sharing that as he was screaming and raising his fists in anger, he felt this amazing calmness. Like a blanket of cool air shrouding him in support and comfort. He sat down, eyes closed. After a few deep breathes, he began to pray. And as he did, the color crimson came into focus. It drew near to him. Closer and closer. The crimson began to shift to a bright and vibrant red. The speed at which it approached increased and it continued to get closer and closer until it just stopped right at the tip of his nose.

His eyes were clinched. He kept asking God . . . Why? . . . Why? . . . Why? . . . Why? He began to grow frustrated again. He felt as though God was not listening. It was as if He didn’t care. Then! . . . that cool reassurance came over him again. At that moment, it was placed in him a sense of understanding that could only come from God.

Will said it wasn’t a message. It wasn’t like God spoke to him in an audible voice. The only way he could describe it was as though a long and thorough conversation had taken place in the matter of a millisecond and all he had from it was reassurance. That reassurance was this. Will described it so well in art.



You know when you go to a museum full of beautiful paintings, like the Louvre, and they have those paintings hanging on the wall that are 20-30 feet high and 30-40 feet across. There's every color imaginable. Every shade of blues and greens and yellows and reds. These paintings are so big and so colorful you have to stand 40-50 feet away just to get the whole painting into a single view with your eyes. Well imagine putting your nose right up to the center of this painting. All you would be able to see is a single brush stroke of a single shade of a single color. You would have absolutely no idea what it was you were looking at, let alone what the whole picture was about. And you definitely would have no idea why the painting was even painted. Will said, that was me!

You see, we are going to go through tough times. Some of us are going to go through really hard times. And a few of us will experience nightmare level events in our lives. There will be absolutely no

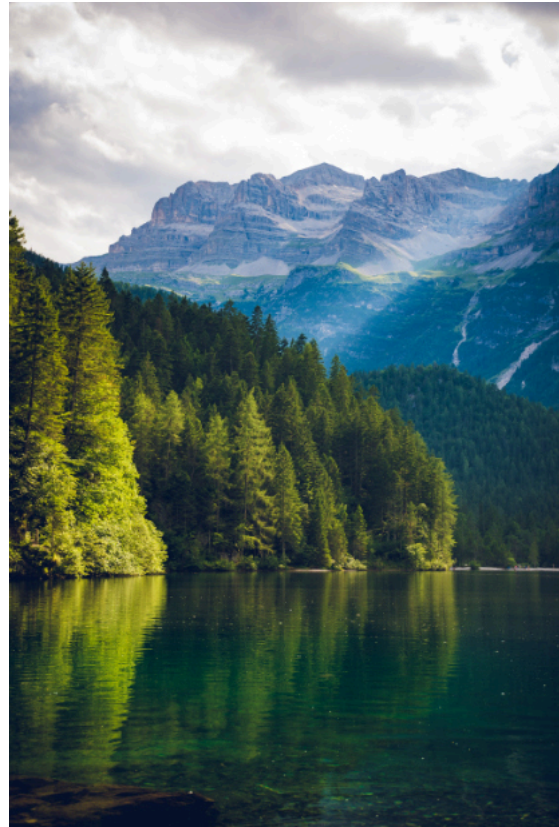
reasonable answer or response that will justify why and what you are going through. You will go through a range of emotions and ask unanswerable questions. All of this is because we are too close to the painting. Many times, we are the brush strokes of the painting. That is what I realized on that day.

Over this year, I have been able to step back from the painting enough to see that I will be okay. I still have many questions and I absolutely still get frustrated and sad. It won't be until I am far enough away from the painting, before I will be able to see what exactly God was doing, or painting, in this moment.

When it comes to your part of the same canvas I am on, you too will never be far enough back to see the whole picture. It will not be until we are looking at it from Heaven, until we are back far enough from the painting, where we will see what the Master is doing.

What Will said in that last moment has gotten me, and others I have counseled, through so many difficult times in their lives. It reminds me of watching Bob Ross make some happy clouds, majestic mountains, and a gentle stream. Then out of the blue, he just swipes right down the canvas with a big black line and says I think a tree belongs here. And I'm like NO, you ruined the picture! But you know what? Every single time, as he wrapped up his painting, the picture was amazingly beautiful. I think, God is doing that. He is working the painting putting happy clouds, majestic mountains, and gentle streams. Then, out of no where . . . BAMM! He puts a "tree" that we run right in to. It makes no sense. Why in the world did that happen? Why would God "allow" this to happen?

We must realize that He is the Creator, the Artist, the Master, and we are His brush strokes. How amazing when we look at it from this perspective. We are the brush strokes God is using to paint the greatest masterpiece of all time. Ever! How blessed are we to be a part of His pallet of color. Remember, you are too close to the painting to see what HE is doing, but just know, it is a masterpiece!



Robert Vela
Executive Minister

Art Through Photos

“The first demand any work of art makes upon us is to surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way.” C. S. Lewis

When I first began my position here at Tates Creek as the Communications Director, there were a few things I knew for certain would be part of my job. I knew I would be in charge of posting to the church social media channels, I would do church graphics, plan media campaigns, and handle any outreach efforts for the church. I knew I would communicate with our online audience, that I would help to create slides on Sunday mornings, and that I would work to support our ministry teams and their yearly ministry efforts. My first week here, I quickly realized that we would need photos taken on Sunday mornings at minimum, to share our Sunday experiences online each week and to use on our website, graphics, handouts, etc. Having little photography experience, I grabbed the camera from our Youth area and began shooting photos on Sunday mornings, and later at church, youth, and children’s events as well. If you follow us on Facebook or Instagram, you may notice that every Monday, I post what I like to call “Sunday Snapshots.” I go through hundreds of photos



taken during our Sunday morning services, edit, and post the 10 that I feel capture our Sunday worship the best. What I have realized over the last three years is that sorting through the hundreds of photos, while timely, is truly a gift that I am able to receive every Monday and has turned into a way I have seen the Lord work each week. You see, every Monday, I get the opportunity to see the

captured moments of our church worshipping the Lord. I get to see young families walking into our church building with their small children and new babies. I get to see our senior adults holding the doors for one another, greeting old friends

with an excitement that can only come from a friendship that has spanned 50-60 years now. I get to capture our first-time visitors and the ways they fall into the welcoming arms of our congregation.

I get to capture the moment someone makes the decision to give their life to Christ and be baptized. I get to capture our Sunday morning volunteers holding doors, passing out communion, shaking hands, and helping old and new visitors find their way. I get to see our worship team pour out their God given gifts and talents, worshipping together and leading our congregation in songs that have been prayed over and prepared for with countless hours of



practice. I get to see our choir worship God in a way that makes the entire room feel His great presence, resembling an image that I believe only Heaven will be able to replicate for us. I get to see our Middle School and High School students meet each other in the church lobby and catch up on their weeks together, sneaking donuts and chocolate milk I might also add. I get to see our Bates Creek Kids excited to get to their Sunday morning activities, greeted by the smiling and welcoming faces of our volunteers. I get to see grandparents introducing their new grand-babies for the first time, how full of joy and pride they are. I get to capture longtime members

who have moved away returning to visit, reconnecting with old friends and reminiscing on old times. For some, I get to capture the last Sunday they were able to join us here at Bates Creek, people who are no longer with us and have gone on to their heavenly homes. Hugs, smiles, tears, handshakes, laughter, song, God has given me the opportunity to capture all these elements that embody His church and His people.

You see, I still don't consider myself much of a photographer. But over the last few years, I have started to see the way the art of these photos has truly captured images of God's people and His church. Week after week, I get to

see God working through our people. Sometimes, the message of the photos is God showing me His faithfulness. If my week or weekend has been long, if I find myself in a rut when it comes to meeting God in His word, or spending time in prayer, these images have reminded me of His goodness, of His consistency. When the world around me seems to fight against Christianity, or the church, these photos have reminded me that His church still remains strong, and full of faithful people worshiping Him week after week. God is working through the art of these images, showing the love and support of His people.



One of my favorite and most unexpected parts of seeing these photos transform over the last few years, has been the number of people who have approached me to say “thank you” for capturing them or their loved ones on a Sunday morning. When I first started photographing our congregation, I was met with some hesitation and some discomfort, understandably so. I’ll be the first to admit, having a candid photo of yourself taken can sometimes be intimidating or unpleasant. Now, I am met with smiling faces, and messages letting me know people are excited to see what 10 photos I post online each week. Seeing members of our congregation smile as they tell me that they have framed photos in their homes now from Sunday mornings, some saying these are the best photos of them they have, or that this is the first photo that has been taken of them in years. Comments from people online excited to see their friend’s photo, tagging each other and encouraging one another. It has been wonderful getting to see the way God has used these photos to connect people, bring joy into their lives, tell a story, and boost their confidence in who they are as children of God.

I am truly thankful for the way God has worked through the art of the photos taken here at Tates Creek and am excited to see the way He will continue to work through our church photos and videos in the future.

*Lauren Holderman
Communications Director*



If You Can't Make Art, Let it Make You

Some see music as being synonymous with worship. In fact, some would see designing a gathering for worship without the use of music to be foolhardy if not impossible. But as worship is simply the obedient heart orientation of the worshiper directed toward triune glorification and divine formation, we see that music hasn't really got much to do with that at all.

And yet, music as an art-form has an essential place in the worship of the church.

When God led his people out of slavery in Egypt, he did so for the express purpose of having them serve (worship) him (Exod 4:23; 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13). God then gave his people very regimented, structured, and specific laws about how they should keep covenant with him. This affected the way they lived their lives in service to Yahweh, and how they treated others. When the time came to construct a place of worship for his people, God invoked the power of ritual and symbol to communicate the magnitude of his infinite character. In the construction of the tabernacle, God commands his people to craft pieces of art for their places of worship.

Our places of worship should tell us about the God we serve. For the tabernacle, the furniture and fixtures of worship communicated qualities of God (Exod 25-30). The tabernacle was portable by design, to show God as Lord of all creation, not just a particular spot. The altar was a fixture where smoke would rise, symbolizing their offerings going up through the sky, our pleas of mercy lifted to God. The laver was a practical place of washing after the sacrifices were made, but it also established water as an indelible symbol of God's cleansing and deliverance for his people. Doubtless, they would remember the waters God held apart for their deliverance from Egypt. In this, water symbolizes and communicates the story of Israel's salvation. The menorah within the tabernacle was embellished with golden almond leaves. In Hebrew the word for almond sounds like the word for see. Therefore, by the vigilant and ever-burning light of the menorah, the Israelites would have remembered that God sees them. God's people have come to understand symbol as a powerful conduit for communicating who God is. Art helps humanity in taking the concepts of the infinite and boiling them down to be transposed into finite human language.



This is the place of art among the people of God.

God employs the direct commands written in the form of human language to communicate his intentions for his people (Gen. 1:28; 2:15-17, Exodus 20) but when it comes to the lived experiences of worship of his people, He acknowledges we need something that will stick with us. He knows we need another language—a language of image, sound, texture, time, color, and rhyme.

As the story of God continues, we encounter one leader of Israel who radically integrates the usage of musical art as one of the primary forms of worship of

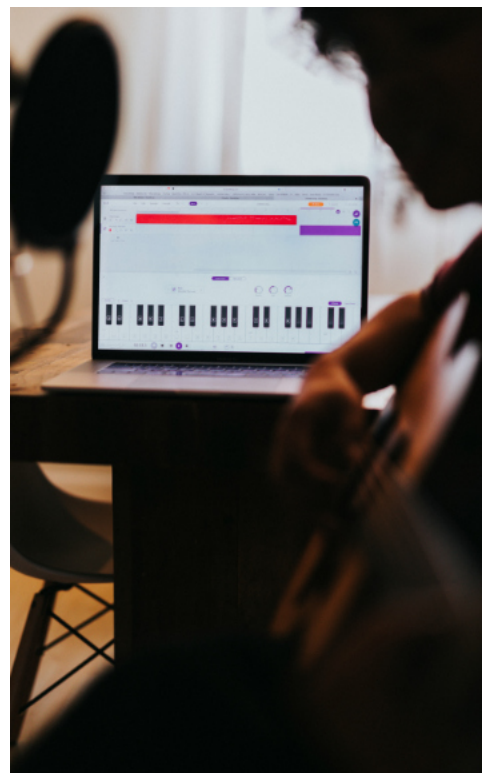
the people of God. Israel's worship seemingly employed some forms of music in the past (Exodus 15), but never like it did with the advent of David's designs for worship.

This great leader instilled music as a primary use of art in worship namely because he himself was a musician. Before David, the places in God's Word where his people are commanded to sing are very little. After David, this command is suffused throughout Scripture. This is very good news if you're a songwriter.¹

¹ I'm a songwriter.

I still remember the first song I wrote for the purpose of worship. It was bad. And while it will never leave my memory—as though it were branded onto my brain—still, I pray you never have the dissatisfaction of having to hear it. That said, the art we make over our lifetimes can become a reflection of the way we encounter and know God. That first song is somewhat precious to me because it reflects the youth of an early relationship with my Creator. It's expression unencumbered with a need to impress, or, for that matter, to reach for any deeper meaning. Its sophomoric poetry is unburdened by intention, balance, or originality. Yet, it remains within a collection of artifacts of the interior of my being that remind me of where I've been in my pursuit of God.

Despite those early, flailing grasps at writing songs for worship, I felt this inchoate impression that this was something I should be doing. I have been honing my songwriting skills for nearly fifteen years now and I still feel the same way.



Plato says, “Let me make the songs of a nation, and I care not who makes its laws.”

This is the hope of the songwriter. Laws are upheld and struck down based upon what the populous sees fit at any given time in history, but the songs of a people stick far longer. In other words, there's a reason why not everyone can agree on a bible translation, but everyone delights to sing *How Great Thou Art*! Truly good art and truly durable music will win out, creating the stylistic preferences, and in some cases, theological sensibilities of the church. Plato knew the power of gripping the heart to harness influence over the mind. In the case of the church, if the songs of the people are heading the right direction, there's a high likelihood that their spiritual formation in Scripture is also God-centered.



In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, Tim Robbins's character, Andy Dufresne, a prisoner in the fictitious Shawshank State Prison, is punished with a lengthy time in isolation after playing a record of classical music over the speakers in the yard. After his release from two weeks of isolation, he shares lunch with his fellow inmates, who jeer that he should have played something good like Hank Williams. Dufresne explains that isolation was the easiest time he ever did because he, “had Mr. Mozart to keep me company.” His table guests fell silent. Pointing first to his head, then to his heart, he continued, “it's in here, and in here. That's the beauty

of music, they can't take that away." His confidant, played by Morgan Freeman spoke up. "I played a mean harmonica as a younger man. I lost interest in it though. Didn't make much sense in here," he chimed. Dufresne retorted, "In here's where it makes the most sense. You need it so you don't forget that there's something inside that they can't get to. That they can't touch. That's yours....hope."

Art connects with some deep part of us and allows us to curate something of a time capsule of our experiences, our expressions, our loves. We attach meaning to images, sounds, and phrases that we allow to adorn the interior of our souls. Like a shoebox stuffed with prints and slides of old family photos kept in vain from the brittle and yellow inevitability of age, we place each loved piece of art into its place in our frail memories. We seize the delicate order and fitness of words, we house rare treasures collected from our travels in the world, and we confiscate art to the confines of our consciousness, leaving it to ferment within the secret places of our mind and delight in tasting its richness year by year. We hold onto the beautiful because it carries meaning for us. We try to hold on about as well as we can capture the fleeting sound of an echo.

We each have that place where art resides inside of us which we return to in validation of the loves we've shared, and the places we've seen God. We keep art with us as an altar—a small stack of stones—which calls out to us to remember the past and to anticipate God's promised future.



Mason Ballard
Worship Minister





Praising God

You may have been there before. You have what feels like a mountain of items on the to-do list and a small amount of time to get it done. You go through the day (or week) feeling one step behind. I know I've been there more times than I want to admit.

One day I was doing just that. Mindlessly going through the motions of the day on a mission to check things off one by one. Then, in the distance, I hear our son playing music. It became quite loud, and I could hear his voice too. Next, I hear a foot tapping on the ground. I go to see what he is up to, and he is full on dancing with his hands raised, worshiping. He was singing his heart out!

He was truly just living in the moment and praising God. The Lord stopped me in my tracks that day. I had heard Austin playing music and singing before that day. I just didn't stop to watch him. What an amazing example of pure love and joy! It was not some famous composition or work of art, but it spoke to my heart like nothing else could. God spoke to me through my son's Worship. What a beautiful sight! What a beautiful sound! What a reminder to prioritize my relationship with God amid my "agenda."

Since that day, Austin has had many more times of Worship right there in his room. I often join in!



Dawn Vela
Children's Director



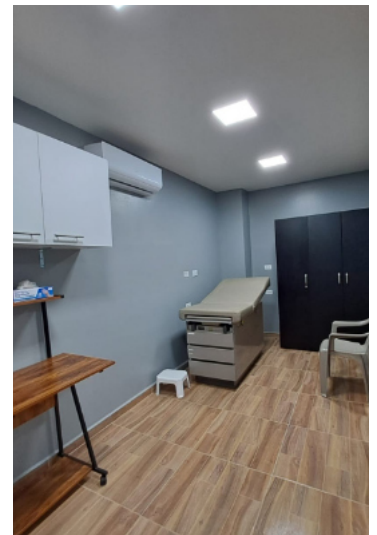
Light Shines in the Darkness

Usually when we receive a newsletter from Judy Fish, she speaks in general terms about spreading the gospel and provides thought-provoking devotional material. This is because posting her location in some of the most dangerous countries in the world could put her and her team at risk. However, in the past three years Emerge Global, her sending agency, has been working in El Salvador, which is a dark country where most communities are gang-controlled areas of violence and poverty. Judy has spent time there helping volunteers from an American church build a basic health center. The project was also sponsored by other American agencies including IDES and FAME.

When Judy and her team arrived, they had five days to complete work on the clinic in order for it to be ready for the scheduled opening celebration. They had to weld a platform for water tanks, assemble five wall and five floor cabinets, install and stock various dispensers, repair a leaky water line, and paint. They worked side by side with community members who had completed an amazing amount of work since the team's last visit. The opening service for the Clinica de Crecimiento was attended by local citizens, government officials, American workers, and local Christians. It began with a church service held outdoors under the stars and was centered on thanking God for His presence and faithfulness.

In her report, Judy says:

The phrase “in the darkness” is a common theme throughout the Bible. It serves as a reminder of God’s presence and faithfulness even amid difficult times. Just one of the many Messianic prophecies found in the Old Testament, Isaiah 42, speaks of a coming Messiah who will be a “Light for the nations”. . .who will “bring light to those who live in darkness” (Isaiah 9). In the New Testament, Jesus Himself is referred to as the “light of the world” (John 8), and His followers are called to be the “light of the world” (Matthew 5).





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