

THE SUBLIME

JOB 38:4-11:

*“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?
Tell Me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements?
Surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?
To what were its foundations fastened? Or who laid its cornerstone,
When the morning stars sang together, And all the sons of God shouted for joy?
Or who shut in the sea with doors, When it burst forth and issued from the womb;
...When I fixed My limit for it, And set bars and doors;
When I said, ‘This far you may come, but no farther, And here your proud waves must stop!’*

GENESIS 1:9-10:

*God said, “Let the waters beneath the sky flow together into one place,
so dry ground may appear.” And that is what happened.
God called the dry ground “land” and the waters “seas.”
And God saw that it was beautiful.*

In the first translation of the Bible from Hebrew to Greek, the word “**kalos**” carries two meanings. Not just good, but **beautiful**.

When God’s repetitive chorus and sevenfold refrain over creation becomes *“God saw it was beautiful,”* the whole tone pivots.

“Good” in our perspective gives off vibes of functional. Useful. Productive. Utilitarian. But God wasn’t utilitarian in his creating. So much of creation simply exists to be beautiful.

Beauty is one of God’s divine attributes and at the core of who He is.

The theologian and author Wendy Farley said:

“Without food, our bodies die. Without beauty, our spirits die.”

IF God truly is beauty, then engaging with beauty is a spiritual pursuit that will give us life. **BUT** also – **IF** God is beauty – how we define and consider beauty is crucial, because it will determine how we engage with a beautiful God.

And by definition, beautiful objects provoke pleasurable feelings like delight and satisfaction. We often think of beautiful things as symmetrical. Orderly. Balanced. Comfortable. And because beauty is pleasing and desirable... we long to possess it, to hold it.

And this is notable, because just like our impulse is to make beauty ours, all through human history our impulse has been to turn God into something we can control or possess.

There is a side of beauty that cannot be possessed or clutched.

THE SUBLIME

**Where beauty is pleasant and familiar, the sublime is powerful and fearsome.
And where we impulsively long to possess beauty, the sublime threatens to overpower us.**

Bierstadt's landscapes as a part of **The Hudson River Company**, a collection of artists employed to paint America's landscapes.

But these weren't paintings you stood over in critique, or leaned in to assess...

You stood before them as they towered over you... they all but enveloped you.

Edmund Burke wrote: *“the passion caused by the great and sublime in nature... is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror.”*

“[whatever] operates in a manner analogous to terror is a source of the sublime.”

The sublime is this transcendent beauty that mixes tranquility with terror.

And the sublime does more than that – in our experience of it, it also taps into our culture's spiritual impulse – this feeling we can't shake that there's something more.

Another Hudson River painter – Thomas Cole – once wrote, *“Prophets of old retired into the solitudes of nature to wait the inspiration of Heaven. It was on Mount Horeb that Elijah witnessed the mighty wind, the earthquake and the fire; and heard the “still small voice” – that voice is yet heard among the mountains! St. John preached in the desert; the wilderness is YET a fitting place to speak of God.”*

Moses asking to see God's face in **Exodus 33** - His full glory could destroy us.

Luke 5 when Simon Peter has been in his boat as Jesus provided a miraculous catch.

He beholds Jesus' glory and in a mix of awe and apprehension, says *“Oh LORD, please leave me – I'm too much a sinner to be around you.”*

Jesus' reply? *“Don't be afraid!”*

This tension within the sublime makes me think of **Susan and Aslan** in CS Lewis' classic work *“Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”*

The reply she gets: *“Safe? Who said anything about safe? Course he isn't safe. But he's good”*

And so is life. Life is beautiful. Life is brutal. We'll all experience both tranquility and trepidation, appreciation and apprehension.

Terrence Malleck's “Tree of Life.”

The film begins with the quote from Job 38 that we also began with tonight:

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?

When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.”

In the movie when the family finds out their son has died, we hear the mother's whispered voice, a quiet prayer of lament: *“Where were you?”*

We all have our *“where were you?”* moments that question the goodness of God.

Raj's diagnosis

Her asking “where were you” and the ensuing cosmic visuals of creation are a notable tip of the cap to the end of Job that was quoted at the beginning of the movie:

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth...When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” (Job 38: 4, 7).

God in his reply points to this reality – I’m transcendent.

Two Strands of God’s Transcendence + Two Demands of God’s Transcendence

The OTHERness of God.

Psalm 19 says that creation and *“the heavens declare the glory of God.”*

But elsewhere in the Psalms we see things like Psalm 114:7 where it says:

“Tremble, o Earth, at the presence of the LORD / At the presence of the God of Jacob.”

We see that even nature itself is subject to the sublime transcendence of God!

It’s not that God has nothing to do with Creation.

But He transcends it.

God can’t be contained by our attempts at logical formulas.

The 2nd strand of God’s transcendence: **The Uncontainability of God.**

Burke in his writing on the sublime, writes that:

“In scripture, wherever God is represented as appearing or speaking, everything terrible in nature is called up to heighten the awe and solemnity of the divine presence.”

God opens up to Job in intimidating fashion as it says: *Then the LORD answered Job from the whirlwind: “Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words? Brace yourself like a man, because I have some questions for you, and you must answer them.”*

But God’s warning to Job goes beyond the simple truth – you aren’t God.

God is also warning all who read it that He will not be boxed in or reduced to less than He is.

Isaiah 55:8-9 reads:

“My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,” says the Lord. “And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine.

For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.”

We say it all the time – **we all have a desire to know God and be known by Him.**

The comfort – we can know him. The discomfort – we will never know him fully.

I mentioned Lucy’s feelings about meeting Aslan the lion.

Later on in the second book when they are reunited Lucy says **“Aslan, you’re bigger!”**

He says that’s because you’re older. She’s confused and asks “it’s not because you’re older?”

He explains to her that every year you grow, you will find me bigger.

This is a profound picture of our relationship with God.
God in his sublime mystery proves to be bigger again and again.

Two demands of God's transcendence:

Humility

Rowan Williams, the poet and theologian, once said of beholding beauty: *"To be absorbed in the sheer otherness of any created order or beauty is to open the door to God, because it involves that basic displacement of the dominating ego without which there can be no spiritual growth."*

But unlike spiritual growth Rowan Williams points to, the "humility" our culture pushes us toward is often **reductionism**. We're nothing but a bunch of cells. Etc.

David in **Psalm 8:3&4** says: *"When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?"*

David is feeling the effects of the sublime in light of the expansive universe.
But God. I feel small. But God is mindful of lil old me. And he cares.

This reality leads us to the second demand of God's transcendence...

Trust

The enlightenment era's stance was **"we can figure it out."**
The result of these beliefs is the idea that to trust in something you don't fully understand is folly
But this reality looms large: *we'll never figure God out.*

There was a monk from Holland who once said:
*"Twenty one years I have prayed and meditated with the monks of the abbey.
Hours and hours of the day and night. And yet...
I hope that I do not shock or scandalize anybody: God was really unknown to me."*

Thomas Aquinas said: *"the highest knowledge of God is to know that we don't know God".*

God doesn't ask for Job's understanding. It would be an impossible ask.
Rather the implication is He's asking for Job's trust.

*That means that God is bigger than my problems.
God is bigger than the things that weigh me down and try to spark worry daily.
God is bigger than the problems I come against and He's bigger than the problems I cause.*

But... that also means there won't be an answer to every question.
There won't be a resolution to every problem. There won't be healing for every pain.

That might sound depressing for some.

Library Technique + Deuteronomy 29:29:

The Lord our God has secrets known to no one. We are not accountable for them, but we and our children are accountable forever for all that he has revealed to us, so that we may obey all the terms of these instructions.

So there's plenty of noise – more specifically mysteries and questions I won't know this side of heaven. They can fuel anger and doubt, or I can put them in my Deuteronomy 29 file and mentally put them back on the shelf.

When you go to a museum... a good practice: **READ THE PLAQUE**

What does that mean for us? Go from gazing upon God's beauty to reading His Word.

When I do that I'm not left overwhelmed by the magnitude or otherness of the sublime.

I'm left overwhelmed that this God loves me.

Jesus is absolutely crucial to any conversation about God's transcendence.

Because in our culture we often love to talk about God as a "Spirit."

Why? Because it's universal and unspecific.

But we can and should point specifically to Jesus.

The concrete teachings of Jesus. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Athanasius – "It is more pious and more accurate to signify God from the Son and call him Father, than to name him from his works only and call him unoriginate"

Does God in his loving care take away every hardship? No.

Does He remove all suffering? No.

Does he let me know why? No.

As I get older, God - like Aslan - gets bigger. Bigger than my **perspective**.

Bigger than any **problems**. Bigger than any **diagnosis**. Bigger than my **hardships**.

May my trust grow commensurately.

David ends Psalm 8 and his consideration of God caring for him, as small as he is compared to God's transcendence – *"Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the Earth!"*