

It was February 2020. COVID-19 was a rapidly growing concern, but it had not yet been declared a global pandemic. Looking back, my wife Jan and I realize how incredibly fortunate we were to have had the chance to see *Hamilton* performed live at the Princess of Wales Theatre just weeks before everything shut down. A generous couple from this church had gifted us with tickets to the musical, *which we thoroughly enjoyed*. In my humble opinion, it's the best musical ever.

It might not be everyone's cup of tea, I know. But for me, I'm quite interested in history for starters— American history in particular (I'm originally from the US) — and *Hamilton* is all about American history. It's also a hip hop musical, and while I'm not a big follower of that genre, I am very much a word guy—a language guy— and I found the rapid-fire lyrical precision and turn of phrase throughout the musical to be jaw-droppingly stunning.

The melodies throughout the musical were evocative, sometimes haunting. And as someone who deeply values diversity and racial reconciliation, to see my home country's founding fathers and mothers portrayed by a cast intentionally composed of mostly people of colour—took my breath away.

I spent most of the night either sitting there staring in wide-eyed wonder with a stupid grin on my face, or wiping tears from my eyes. Something about that musical stirred my soul. It moved me deeply. It was an absolute work of art, a thing of *beauty*.

It's said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and there's truth to that. What's beautiful to me may not seem as beautiful to you, and vice-versa. Regardless, it won't be hard for us to agree that virtually all human beings have the experience of being moved by beauty every now and then. Can you remember a time when you were moved by beauty— whether in nature or art or music or literature or a great recipe or a newborn baby or an act of kindness or anything else? If you're with us online, please do tell us in the chat about a form of beauty that has moved you.

Indeed, beauty can evoke some of our most powerful feelings. It awakens deep longings within us. Have you ever wondered why that is?

Could it be that we unconsciously sense there is Someone (*someone with a capital "S"*) who stands behind all that is beautiful?

Could it be that in a language beyond words, our longings are pointing us to the ultimate Beautiful One, the One who is the Source of all beauty?

Today, we'll be considering questions of this nature as we continue in our series *Signposts of Hope in a Suffering World*. The series explores seven major themes in John's gospel.

We've already looked at the themes of *Love, Freedom and Power*. Today's theme is *Beauty*, and in the weeks ahead we'll be looking at *Spirituality, Truth and Justice*.

We've talked about how these themes serve as "signposts". A signpost points beyond itself toward a particular reality or destination. And these seven signposts—these grand themes in John's gospel— all point to a few different things at the same time.

They point, first of all, to *our deepest human longings*. For example, we've already been talking about how beauty awakens longing within us.

At the same time, these signposts point to the fact *the world is not as it should be*. For all the beauty this world has to offer, we're also reminded daily of its ugliness— of its sin, folly and brokenness— in so very many ways.

And even when we are deeply moved by beauty, the experience is fleeting, isn't it? It just doesn't last. C.S. Lewis once wrote a poem about the false promise of spring, with the birds singing that this time, summer will go on forever. But it never does.

As much as beauty stirs our longing, it never seems to satisfy it. Something's missing and it stabs at us, reminding us that things in this world just aren't as they should be.

But thirdly, and most importantly, beauty is a signpost of *hope* pointing to the fact that *God is at work in Jesus to set the world right*. And that's what we're going to talk about for the rest of this message, as we dive once again into the Gospel of John.

Indeed, the more familiar you become with John's gospel, the more you'll come to see that it is itself composed with great artistry and *beauty*. Today, I hope you'll be able to see the beauty of John's Holy Spirit-inspired literary artistry, but in order to do that, we'll have to really dive into the text. So are you ready to get your Bible on today?

Because today, we're going to consider two closely connected themes in John's gospel that point us to ultimate Beauty— to the Beauty that is the hope of a suffering world—the Beauty that is your hope and mine. Once we've looked at these two themes, I'll conclude

the message with a couple of takeaways, and then, we'll celebrate the Lord's Supper together. That's the plan, so let's get started.

The first of two themes we'll look at today in John is:

## **1. The beauty of God's presence.**

Now at first glance, you might get the impression that John's gospel—or even the whole Bible for that matter—doesn't have all that much to say about beauty. If you look up the word "beauty" in a Bible concordance, you won't find very many references, although there definitely are some, and they're quite important.

But if you look a little more closely, you'll notice that the theme of beauty actually beckons to us throughout the pages of scripture.

The second half of the Old Testament book of Exodus, for example, is very much about beauty. It tells us of the construction of the Tabernacle—this grand, portable tent in which God has chosen to dwell in the midst of his people. Wherever the Israelites went, they would carry the Tabernacle, and *God's presence* would go with them.

And the Tabernacle was a work of exquisite beauty—of great art and skill, meant to delight the senses and stir the imagination. In Exodus you can read in great detail of its rich colours and vivid decorations which must have been all the more striking in the midst of the barren desert the Israelites were wandering through. You see, *the Tabernacle was designed to reflect the beauty of the One whose presence dwelled within it.*

Now fast-forward to the New Testament, to John's gospel. In his very first chapter, where does John take us? He takes us directly to the theme of the Tabernacle, telling us that:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. <sup>1</sup>

John tells of this figure called the "Word" who has been with God from the beginning, who himself is God and through whom everything has been created. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:14 (NIV)

<sup>2</sup> See John 1:1-3

The *Word* is Jesus, and in Jesus, God became a flesh-and-blood human being, and made his home among us. The original Greek of this verse literally reads, he *tabernacled* in our midst.

So into this broken world God comes in the tent of a human body to be present with us. And this is a God who cares deeply about beauty— a God who, according to the Bible, originally created the heavens and earth to reflect his own beauty, his own glory. As Psalm 19 puts it:

The heavens declare the glory of God;  
the skies proclaim the work of his hands...  
...their voice goes out into all the earth,  
their words to the ends of the world.<sup>3</sup>

Just as the Tabernacle would later be designed to reflect the beauty of the God who dwelled within it, *creation was designed to reflect the glory of the Creator.*

*Glory.* It's a word found everywhere throughout the Bible. It speaks of the weighty and awesome—but also stunningly beautiful— *presence of God*. Glory and beauty, you see, are more or less two different words for the same thing. What is glorious is by definition beautiful.

And do you remember what John told us about Jesus, the Word? Let's review. He told us that:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.<sup>4</sup>

**Jesus is the ultimate reflection of God's glory and beauty.** In what he says. In what he does. In what he teaches. In how he heals and delivers. In how he lives. In how he loves. In how he dies. In how he is raised to life again.

As the Bible says in Hebrews:

The Son radiates God's own glory...<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 19:1, 4a (NIV)

<sup>4</sup> John 1:14 (NIV)

<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 1:3

You see, our human longing for beauty is a God-given signpost designed to lead us to the beauty of God's presence in and through Jesus. He is the Beautiful One your heart is truly longing for.

C.S. Lewis goes as far as to suggest that:

We do not want merely to see beauty... We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. <sup>6</sup>

John's gospel speaks about how Jesus *unites us* with the God who is Beauty. Praying to God the Father in John 17, Jesus says of those who follow him:

"I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one." <sup>7</sup>

We often use this passage to underscore the importance of unity between believers. And that's certainly true. But even more fundamentally, this passage is about *our union with God through Jesus*.

God's aim is that you and I might "pass into" and receive and become one with the Beauty expressed in the profound loving fellowship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit—the divine Trinity.

So the next time beauty moves your soul and stirs up longing within you, remember that it's God's way of calling you into the beauty of his presence— and into loving union, into oneness with God through Jesus.

If you follow Jesus, that union is expressed by the fact that God the Holy Spirit has taken up residence inside of you. We see this in John 14, where Jesus gives the following promise to his disciples:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth. The world cannot receive him, because it isn't looking for him and doesn't recognize him. But you know him, because he lives with you now and later will be in you. <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*.

<sup>7</sup> John 17:22 (NLT)

<sup>8</sup> John 14:16-17 (NLT)

This promise would be fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, when Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in the hearts of those who follow him— including you and me. Do you know what this means? It means that if you follow Jesus, you have become God’s Tabernacle. You are God’s Temple.

God himself, in the person of the Holy Spirit, is present in you. He lives within you. If you’re a follower of Jesus, put your hand on your heart and repeat after me:

*I am God’s Tabernacle... I am God’s Temple.* [If you’re with us online, type it in the chat]

God so wants you to know the beauty of his presence, that he has united himself with you, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit. He has come to dwell within you, so that your life can reflect his beauty to the world.

This connects with a related theme we find in John’s gospel:

## **2. The beauty of a renewed creation.**

Last Sunday Pastor Andrew was speaking about how John, in the opening words of his gospel, intentionally echoes the book of Genesis, where the story of creation is told. In Genesis chapter 1 verse 1 we read, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”<sup>9</sup>

And in John chapter 1 verse 1 we read:

In the beginning was the Word...<sup>10</sup>

In this way, John is signalling to his readers that in Jesus, God is going to renew creation.

A couple chapters later, we come to the most famous verse in the Bible— John 3:16. Let me read it for you, throwing in verse 17 as well:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 1:1a (NIV)

<sup>10</sup> John 1:1a (NIV)

<sup>11</sup> John 3:16-17 (NIV)

The original Greek word for *world* in these verses is *cosmos*, which refers to the entire created order. God sent Jesus to save—to rescue and restore—not only you and me, but also the entire created order.

And so, to borrow the words of author John Eldredge:

Despite what you may have been told, [Jesus] didn't focus our hopes on a great airlift to heaven. He promised the renewal of all things, including the earth you love [in all its beauty], every precious part of it... [The thing you are made for] is not the wispy vagaries of a cloudy heaven, but the sharp reality of a world made new.<sup>12</sup>

The theme of how God is renewing creation through Jesus is woven like a beautiful tapestry throughout John's gospel, and reaches its high point in chapter 20—the resurrection chapter. If you're able to pick up on the clues John gives, you'll see very quickly that the text ripples with overtures of new creation.

John's gospel story has just reached its darkest point. Jesus has been crucified. He's dead and buried. And we read that:

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.<sup>13</sup>

John is very intentional to tell us that it's early in the morning *on the first day of the week*. Later, in verse 19, he mentions that it was evening *on the first day of the week*. If you know your Bible, what do you think might be the significance of the term “the first day of the week”? This is an echo of the first day of creation week in Genesis 1:

And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.<sup>14</sup>

In his resurrection account, John continues to drop clues that in Jesus, a new creation has begun. In verse 11, we read:

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> John Eldredge, *All Things New: Heaven, Earth, and the Restoration of Everything You Love*, p. 273, 493.

<sup>13</sup> John 20:1 (NIV)

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 1:5b (NIV)

<sup>15</sup> John 20:11 (NIV)

So two angels, one at the head and one at the foot of where Jesus' body had been. If you know your Bible, can you guess the Old Testament imagery this scene is meant to remind us of? Think back again to the Tabernacle, or after that, the Temple in Jerusalem.

For anyone aware of how the furniture was set up, first in the Tabernacle and then in the Temple, this scene in John is meant to remind us of the mercy seat, which was flanked by golden statues of angelic beings called Cherubim. It was where the Ark of the Covenant was located, the very throne of the living God who dwelled there.

In this scene with Mary at Jesus' empty tomb, John has ushered us into the Holy of Holies. The original room called the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle and the Temple was built as a perfect cube, which represented— *the whole of creation*.

On Easter morning, Mary enters into the tomb like the High Priest would have entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. But if this is the place where you might expect to meet the living God—Mary is surprised to find nobody—literally “no *body*”— was there.

If this empty grave, as John seems to be telling us, is the Holy of Holies, then John is suggesting that Jesus—the ultimate sacrifice of atonement— has broken the curse of sin and death, and the glory of God's presence has emerged, has broken forth into the world, to set about the business of liberating the whole creation from its bondage and brokenness.

In Jesus, the beauty of life has emerged out of death, and with his resurrection we are now within sight of God's ultimate promise coming true:

For the earth will be filled  
With the knowledge of the glory of the Lord,  
As the waters cover the sea.<sup>16</sup>

Through Jesus new creation has begun, a new creation that will ultimately find the world full of the glory of God's presence, full of a *beauty* that will never fade away.

John even tells us that when Mary first sees the risen Jesus at the tomb, she doesn't recognize him right away. She mistakes him for the gardener. Well, if we're in the new Garden of Eden, so to speak—the new creation— that's the right mistake to make!

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<sup>16</sup> Habakkuk 2:14 (NKJV)



I told you we would really dive into the text today, didn't I? In doing so, I hope you can see the beauty of John's literary artistry in pointing us to the glory—the beauty— of God's presence in Jesus, and to the renewal of creation in Jesus.

Just before we celebrate the Lord's Supper, a couple of brief takeaways. First:

- **Learn to enjoy the beauty of God's presence.** We've seen that our human longing for beauty is a God-given signpost designed to lead us to the beauty of God's presence in and through Jesus. He is the Beautiful One your heart is truly longing for. Our longing for the beauty of God's presence won't be fully satisfied until we see Jesus face to face, but that doesn't mean we can't experience his presence now in a way that scratches where our soul itches like nothing else can.

There are so many practices that can help you to grow in the experience of God's presence, but today, I'd like to recommend to you a super-practical worksheet we've developed to help you enjoy the beauty of Jesus' presence in the moments of your everyday life. You'll find it at the link you see on screen and in the chat:

[www.cornerstonechurch.ca/presenceofjesus](http://www.cornerstonechurch.ca/presenceofjesus)

Maybe you're not yet a follower of Jesus, not yet a Christian, but as you've listened today, you sense that the longings of your heart are his invitation to follow him. If you'd like to learn more about what it means to follow Jesus, we have a wonderful web page I totally encourage you to check out: [www.cornerstonechurch.ca/seekers](http://www.cornerstonechurch.ca/seekers)

The second takeaway is to:

- **Reflect God's beauty into the world.** Earlier we talked about how if you're a follower of Jesus, you're God's Tabernacle, God's Temple. The Holy Spirit has taken up residence within you, and through his indwelling beauty, God intends to make something beautiful of your life. He intends for your life to reflect his beauty back into the world. He wants to make you his partner in renewing the world through Jesus.

How can you reflect God's beauty into the world today? In the weeks and months ahead? Through acts of kindness? Through speaking words of encouragement to those who need it?

My daughter Nicole is a really good artist, and one of the ways she reflects God's beauty into the world is through her paintings, drawings, photographs and so on.

Do you have artistic gifts? If so, I encourage you to submit some of your artwork to Cornerstone's [Signposts of Hope Art Exhibit](#), which is coming up at the end of October. This exhibit feature artistic expressions that reflect themes from our current sermon series. We encourage a variety of artwork: Paintings, drawings, sculptures, video, photography, digital art, media or poetry. For more details, check out the web page.

Another huge way that we're called to reflect God's beauty into the world is by serving others. Today, after service, we're actually having a Ministry Fair—both in-person here onsite, and those of you worshipping with us online can also participate by going to [www.cornerstonechurch.ca/serve](http://www.cornerstonechurch.ca/serve).

If you were with us at last week's Town Hall meeting on Zoom, we talked about how Cornerstone is aiming to start a second in-person worship service in mid-November. The demand is certainly there— registration for our in-person Sunday service quickly fills up every single week. But in order to add a second in-person service, we're going to need the help of 109 additional volunteers in a variety of areas.

Maybe the Lord would lead you to fill one of those roles. After service today, those of you here in-person will be invited to peruse the Ministry Fair tables outside and check out the serving opportunities that are available. Those of you online can check out the webpage [www.cornerstonechurch.ca/serve](http://www.cornerstonechurch.ca/serve) to see what opportunities are available, and on that page, you can click to send an email to indicate your interest to serve in a particular area.

## COMMUNION

- **The cross as the ultimate expression of God's glory/beauty**
  - John 12:23-28