



SENSING GOD

Experiencing the
Divine in Nature, Food,
Music & Beauty

JOEL CLARKSON

Refreshing. Restoring. Reorienting. I love the way Joel Clarkson talks about God and life—reality—in his debut, *Sensing God*. He speaks a timeless language—my language, our language—and is in conversation with the great cloud of witnesses in the church now and throughout the ages. Clarkson accentuates the good, true, and beautiful in the reality of our lives and in creation, beckoning us to stop, look, listen, taste, touch, and hear for ourselves—to experience our triune God and the Kingdom with our whole being. The book itself is a feast because it is steeped in God’s life. It is true and elicits joy. Through it, I have beheld God. It is a book for such a time as this, and I couldn’t be gladder for it. I highly recommend it and look forward to more from Clarkson!

MARLENA GRAVES, author of *The Way Up Is Down*

I read this book on a summer day on the shore of Idaho’s Priest Lake, surrounded by timbered mountains. The effect it had on me was a priestly one: mediating grace by fine-tuning my senses to behold beauty and goodness, accompanied by the potent reminder that one cannot grow in spirituality apart from growing in sensuality. By the time I was done, I found that I had been drawn into deeper intimacy with God through attentiveness to and enjoyment of creation.

This is a book to take and read. Then taste and see—and while you’re at it, listen, smell, and touch—and know that God is good.

ERIC E. PETERSON, author of *Letters to a Young Pastor* and *Letters to a Young Congregation*

Both creation and the Incarnation show that God cares deeply about the stuff of earth. The problem is that most of us neglect capturing wonder in favor of productivity, efficiency, and hurry. Helping his readers develop a robust vocabulary of Christian imagination, Joel Clarkson gives us a feast for our senses. Theologically rooted, artistically curious, and reflective, *Sensing God* can help us learn again how to taste and see that the Lord is good.

ASHLEY HALES, author of *Finding Holy in the Suburbs* and *A Spacious Life*

God is at work within His world, but we do not always know how to recognize Him. Joel Clarkson, an artist and a theologian, guides us along the way of becoming fully alive to God. Exegeting poetry and nature, film and music, Scripture and the memories of his own life, he brings us to the edge of wonder and worship.

REV. DR. GLENN PACKIAM, associate senior pastor at New Life Church; author of *Blessed Broken Given*

In *Sensing God*, Joel Clarkson has given us a book which is both highly inspiring and remarkably down-to-earth. In Christ, the Word was made flesh, but too often, we disembodied God and turn Him back into abstract theology. The reflections in this book will help us to find God where He chose to be found, right in the midst of life.

MALCOLM GUILTE, author of *Sounding the Seasons*

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Sensing God: Experiencing the Divine in Nature, Food, Music, and Beauty

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FOREWORD

An artist is made for a feast.

I practice my art in the reality created by such hopes for a Feast of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9). Pulverized minerals such as azurite and malachite are layered over and over onto paper or canvas over gold. Such extravagance and attitude may be met with skepticism in the realm of contemporary art, the very waters I swim in, or even in the academia of art. “Isn’t art about being serious and dark?” “Isn’t art about being transgressive?” “I thought art was poking fun at society?”

In art schools in the world today, you are told to deconstruct yourself. A “critique” is when your assumptions are dismantled. I’ve heard of students who are told not to use the words *beauty* or *creativity* because they connote an imperialistic past. While Christian schools may not be as brutal, the idea of “finding your voice” and being trained to be a “successful artist” is far from what these programs can promise, and many Christian schools mimic the secular to try to prepare the students for the “real” art world.

Many people do not know about the contemporary art world; the word *art* may conjure up works of commercially successful artists such as Thomas Kinkade. In such a transactional realm, the question of Feast is reduced and, well, commoditized to a consumer mind-set. Mall art is like fast food; it's perhaps the only accessible art to purchase for most people, but you should not consume too much of it. Instead, we are made for a Feast.

As this book attests, all humans, not just artists, are made for a Feast. In fact, the whole creation groans for it (Romans 8:22). Only through the trust of our senses, by refining our somatic knowledge, can we discover our ultimate path toward the new, through the banquet prepared in front of our enemies (Psalm 23:5).

Exodus 31 tells us that God gave Bezalel and Oholiab, two craftsmen filled with the Spirit, the ability to construct and also to teach. Our assumptions about making are further tested when we teach, to lead others to journey into the new. Students, I find, are hungry for sensory knowledge. What lies beyond our vista? What is art for? If there is no hope of our senses coming alive in that journey beyond, then why teach? If, as Joel Clarkson puts it, there is in education an “invitation of aroma” present toward the Feast, then that is worth leading and teaching. Even if there is a slight possibility that such a reality exists, it's worth motivating students to reach for it. Art exists for such deeper inquiries; sometimes it even creates a longing for that deeper journey.

I paint in my self-sequestered Princeton studio, using

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Nihonga (Japanese-style painting) materials but for a contemporary art audience. My audience is considered mostly “secular.” Azurite and malachite minerals are pulverized and mixed with nikawa (animal hide glue) by hand and layered over and over on Japanese hand-lifted paper. Such somatic knowledge leads to the intuitive, and over thirty years of experience flows out in a single stroke. At such times I “sense God” facing the fractures of our times, of violence and losses. Such a prismatic vision dispels the dichotomy of secular versus sacred: As all things are in the provenance of the sacred (though we twist them to create idols instead of giving God the glory), art can be attuned to our senses, to point toward the Feast.

How do we create, preparing for the Feast? At such times of deeper wrestlings, I pause to consider the Feast to come, breathe in the aroma of the new. To make, to teach, to live is to love. In a world where many acts of violence are called sense-less, this book lights the path toward a senses-full experience, now a necessary condition toward healing our fractured culture.

Makoto Fujimura, artist



INTRODUCTION

*Getting Good Dirt Under the Fingernails
of Our Senses*

At the end of my twelfth year, my family moved from the heat and smog of suburban Texas to the quietude of a Colorado home pressed up against the very edge of the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. For the first time in their lives, my parents decided to have our new home built from scratch, and for months, we waited in the Texas heat for weekly news of our Colorado bungalow, as builders slowly brought it into being. No detail was passed over; from kitchen fixtures to floral wallpaper patterns, we discussed each choice as a family, excitedly passing along our given selections. When we finally pulled up the long dirt road on a sunny June morning and turned into the driveway, it was exactly as we had imagined it, from soaring pines and quaking aspens to the wraparound porch, accentuating the enormous vista windows angled toward the steep rise of Mount Herman ahead. Everything was perfect.

Everything, that is, except the lawn.

To call it a lawn would have been, perhaps, deceiving, for the large, open area in front of the house was little more

than a patch of dirt, jarringly unattractive in contrast to the otherwise idyllic mountain cove surrounding it on all sides. It had been bulldozed flat and even, which was its only redeeming feature, and loitered listlessly in front of the house like an uninvited guest. Our previous home had sported a half-acre grassy yard with room to run and explore, and the new yard stuck out like a sore thumb in contrast. Through some miscommunication, the lawn had remained unfinished, the only incomplete aspect of our mountain haven. It would be several days until the sod arrived for planting—sod that would transform it from a construction site into a proper grassy field.

The strange cognitive dissonance of the unfinished yard acted like a resonating chamber to the overflow of new experiences I encountered in our first days there. Everything was different; far from the humid, verdant green of central Texas, this landscape was stark and arresting, rising up in steep walls and jutting out at strange angles. The chilled, arid air of the evenings stung my breath, my lungs having not quite adjusted to the mile-high altitude yet. Instead of thick oaks with leafy, emerald canopies and soft humus beneath, pencil-thin evergreens towered over a brittle sandstone forest floor covered in prickly pine needles. At night, stars pressed out toward us with bright attention, not obscured by the dim glow of city lights to which we were so accustomed. The whole of the experience was alluring, yet I found myself feeling held at a distance. I wanted to draw close, to embrace this new orienting of my world, yet, like my lungs, my bearings

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remained unadjusted, always wheezing harder than usual to keep up with the constant stream of in-breaking novelties.

I can still recall, only a few days after moving in, the lumbering truck as it huffed into our driveway, looking like an overgrown, movable hill. The grassy sod my father had ordered had been piled in stacks of tens, and it shuddered like an earthquake when the driver turned off the truck. Carefully, each pallet was removed from the truck bed and placed in even rows at the long end of the yard, patiently waiting for someone to come and direct it toward its final occupation.

“What are we going to do with it?” I asked my father. “Plant it, of course,” he replied. And the next day, we did. Piece by piece, we carried strips of the lush Kentucky bluegrass and began weaving it into the dusty expanse, first turning the soil so that we reached the damp loam beneath and sprinkling in growth supplement, then carefully and methodically laying out each strip. We patterned them like bricks, as if building a horizontal wall against the earth, pressing them tight, one against another, so that the seams melded into each other in perfect, unbroken lines.

At first, I was slow and cumbersome at my work, carefully lifting one strip at a time and keeping it away from myself to avoid unwanted stains; but soon enough, one strip had become two, and then three, and not too long in, my brother and I challenged each other to a contest of who could carry the most of the bluegrass at once, much to the chagrin of my father. Our blue jeans quickly took on a greenish hue as we rolled around in the lush carpet of grass beginning to

stretch dozens of feet into the barren space. Our fingernails quickly filled with the darkened grime of dirt, and our faces somehow received the smudge of muddy joyfulness that can only come from close contact with soil. We made ourselves close at hand to the earth, taking up old, hardened clay and smudging it into newly softened turf. We knew that in so doing, it would more readily nourish the planted grass placed on it; little did we know, however, that it was already beginning to nourish us, planting the essence of that Colorado ground in our hearts and inviting us into participation in it.

When the sun started to set, we laid the final piece of sod and beheld our work, marveling in satisfaction at the emerald sea of wavy green grass before heading inside to clean up for dinner. Even though we all washed up, for days, we still had traces of soil in our hair and dirt under our fingernails. In retrospect, it seems a fitting image for what had happened to us. By drawing close to the mountain landscape, coming into tangible contact with the earth, letting it become a part of our experience, something had irreversibly changed. No longer were we uncertain of our new home, held at a distance; instead, we were invited into participation. That one day of laying the grass of our front yard became the entryway to years of beloved encounters with a Colorado landscape that still is near to my heart today, a home I can call to mind in the closeness of its very natural elements even thousands of miles away on the other side of the ocean.

You see, what I needed was not to think meaningful thoughts about my new home, trying to come to some

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understanding about it from a distance; what I needed was to come into real contact with it, to allow my senses to become immersed in its essence, to tangibly receive close at hand what I could not at arm's length. I needed to have *my senses engaged* in the good work of encounter.

Sensing God's Presence

As Christians, we long for more meaning in the midst of our busy lives. We often feel like we are missing out on something but can't put our fingers on what it is. We go to church and try to achieve a sense of deeper spirituality, but as soon as we walk out the doors, that feeling leaves, and we're back to square one. We know what we think about God and what we ought to believe, but what we believe so rarely escapes into the real world and sets its rhythms in our lives. We are *hungry* for more, *thirsty* to drink of deeper waters, seeking to *touch* the face of the divine. We want to *see* God's presence at work in every corner our lives. Isn't it amazing how so many of the ways that we talk about our growth in faith are *sensory metaphors*?

You can see it easily in contemporary worship songs, which are filled with these adjectives: "*Hungry*, I come to you / For I know You *satisfy*." Or what about "I am desperate for a *touch* of heaven"? Or there's always the classic, "Open the *eyes* of my heart, Lord . . . / I want to *see* you."¹ Why is it that we use these sensory phrases for worship? There's no doubt that they are inspiring and expressive; could it also be that these images are powerful because our senses so shape

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our experience and outlook on life that we cannot escape their influence on us, even when we are raising our worship to the living God? Even more to the point, what if that is because God Himself has given us our senses to know Him on a deeper and more profound level?

I'm reminded of a moment in my early college years, when I was home on a brief break, sitting on the front porch with my mother after dinner. I had been sharing my doubts with her, the growing feeling of uncertainty and confusion in the midst of the intensity and constant change of my university life. I remember sharing with her how I had attended a service of worship during the week prior and left feeling utterly empty and uninspired. "I just don't feel the presence of God, Mom. It's like He's far away from me." She looked at me, surprised, and then laughed. "That's funny, because earlier tonight, we lit the candles for dinner and put on some of your favorite music. And then I served you a homemade meal, which I'm certain you told me was quite delicious and satisfying. And now, you and I are here in the cool summer evening air, looking out at a stunning sunset over the pines. It's beautiful, isn't it?"

She patted my back gently, and together, we watched and marveled as brilliant sunlight faded behind silhouettes of pines into the deep indigo of an August evening.

I've never forgotten that moment, and I've kept its lessons close to my heart over many years. When I am tempted to feel despair or sadness, to question faith or face unanswerable questions about the universe, I stop, get up, go

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to the kitchen, and make myself a cup of tea or coffee. I have a bite of something nourishing to eat, and then I put on some of my favorite music. After I'm feeling better, I sometimes go out for a walk and let the cool air refresh me. Just like in my childhood, when I got down in the dirt and laid the sod row by row, I let myself enter into contact with the world itself, pressing myself nearer to it, and by doing this, I draw closer to the presence of God hidden in every corner.

In recent years, some researchers in microbiology have affirmed the value of exposing children to soil at a young age, how the interaction with germs in everyday dirt actually strengthens the immune system and even provides enzymes that make it easier for a child's body to resist allergies and chronic conditions like asthma. Though the inclination is, of course, to keep kids from getting grimy and grubby, the research pushes in the other direction: Invest in the mess, it says. It is actually more harmful, some experts say, to over-sanitize, to protect children from the very elements which provide the means for their immune systems to naturally strengthen and grow. Healthy kids, suggests this line of thinking, are the ones who are getting dirt under their fingernails.²

What if our faith lives need the same thing? What if the answer we are looking for is not only to believe more fervently, to pray with more gusto, or have more holy thoughts, but to let those desires be heightened by getting the good earthen clay of God's holy world under the fingernails of our senses? What if, instead of simply trying to "be spiritual," we allowed our spiritual world to be informed by our sensory

encounters in the world around us? Perhaps you have felt that no matter what you do, no matter how hard you work the muscles of your faith, somehow they just won't grow. Perhaps you feel they are even atrophying, losing the little bulk they already had, becoming weaker and weaker by the day. You feel far from the Lord, and you don't know how to find your way back. Can I suggest that perhaps the answer is not to try harder but to try something different? What if what you are seeking is hidden in plain sight all around you?

This is the journey of this book: to discover how Jesus is seeking us in the points of sensory contact embedded in every part of our lives. Jesus is calling us to get our hands messy with the work of faith rooted in the soil of the visible, the tangible, and the touchable—and to let that engaged work form and inform our witness to a world desperate for God's restoration. In this book, I invite you to walk with me into that exploration, to get dirt under your fingernails, not only to taste, but to touch, hear, smell, and see that the Lord is good; and that His goodness awaits us in countless sensory opportunities in the world every moment of our lives.

The Scope of Our Journey

Many of us have been taught to downplay experience, to think cautiously about how our senses might teach us. If there is another way, if our senses can, in fact, not only assist us in our spiritual lives but actually lead us into an encounter with Jesus Himself, then what is the precedent for that

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understanding of Christian practice? What is the shape of the theology which underpins that conviction? In the first two chapters of the book, we will explore the relationship between Jesus and His beautiful world, how He is the source and end of all beauty, and how our hearts sacramentally help us give meaning to what we encounter through our senses and return that encounter in praise to God.

In the remainder of the book, we will explore the whole of the sensory world, contemplating it through examples that engage with each of our senses and how they might help us to encounter God. In each of these chapters, I enter into the senses through manifested examples. I mention numerous poems and poets, theologians, writers, musicians, songs, excerpts from novels, experiences with food and drink, favorite places, and much more. I do so because the senses are encountered through *experience*, and my desire is that these examples help enliven your senses as you read about them. I want this book to be a resource for you, to fill you with new concepts and invite you into participation through your senses in the world itself. The examples I give are unapologetically drawn from the sensory things which have delighted, inspired, and convicted me, and I hope that you will see in them a possible parallel to the things that delight, inspire, and convict you.

In addition (and perhaps more importantly), I start each chapter with a story from my life. I do this because I believe, as you will discover more closely in the chapter on the sense of touch, we are more able to practice our sensory rhythms

in close conversation with each other. We make an understanding of the world available through our shared community and communion that is not possible purely on our own. I hope you can see how true this is for me in the way that I turn to authors, artists, thinkers, leaders, friends, and family members over the course of this book to explain my own journey of sensing God. And I encourage you to identify people who may not be listed in this book—from friends and family members to admired public figures to artists and thinkers of all sorts—who may do the same for you. The most profound spiritual engagement through our senses is done in communion with the great cloud of witnesses who encourage us onward in our journey.

Ultimately, I write this book in the hopes that it will awaken your imagination for what it might mean to orient your senses toward the holy. My prayer is that you will become more aware of the scope of the senses in Christian experience, particularly in your own life; that you will feel equipped to understand more of how each sense opens an engagement with Jesus; and that you will feel exhorted to put your senses into practice, both for the sake of your own faith and for the sake of others.

Things This Book Is *Not*

One of the oldest practices in theology, going back to the early days of the church, is the expression of what is called *apophatic theology*. The term comes from a Greek word

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meaning “to deny,” and the practice is in contrast to *cataphatic theology*, which comes from a word meaning, as you may expect, “to affirm.”³ Many of the church fathers found that while there are things we can say about God and the underpinnings of reality in a positive way, the world does not always fit into easy categories, and sometimes the best way to understand something is not to declare what it is but rather what it is *not*. Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and many of the fathers employed this *via negativa* (negative way) in their theology, and it has remained a powerful rhetorical tool used within and outside of Christian practice.

It is in the spirit of the *via negativa* that I want to articulate the scope of this book. Because the senses are by nature built around impression, experience, and affect, they are difficult to pin down with strong, declarative statements. With that knowledge in mind, here is my apophatic guide to what this book is *not*:

This book is not a *step-by-step, how-to guide* for using our five senses. As I explained above, my desire is to walk with you as a friend and an advocate, to guide you through a passageway in which you encounter various points of contact with sensory interaction. My intention is not to instruct your mind in *what to think* but rather to enliven your imagination for *how to engage*. This is not a book primarily concerned with telling you right or wrong ways of putting your senses to work but rather with making you aware of the multitude of different ways that God might meet us through our sensory perception. I sincerely hope that in reading this book,

you won't walk away feeling that you have received some set of correct or exclusive rules for practicing your spirituality through your senses, but rather that you have received a foundation of ideas on which you can build through your own discernment—and through the work of the Holy Spirit in your life.

Because this book is not a user's manual for the senses, it is also not meant to act as *a comprehensive account* of how the senses are applied in the life of a Christian. In fact, very much in the spirit of awakening imagination, in each of the chapters on the rhythms of the senses, I intentionally focus on no more than one or two aspects of a given sense so as to give you *case studies which exemplify one among many ways of applying that sense*. For instance, in the chapter on hearing, I home in on music and don't discuss the spoken word. This is not because I don't value the spoken word or feel that there isn't much to be said about it but rather because I am myself a musician, and that vocation allows me a particular insight into the way music, as one subset of the sense of hearing, might open up our participation in Christ's work in the world. In another chapter, the chapter on touch, I focus on human contact, because this book is about encountering *Jesus* through our senses, and I wanted to focus on the way that Jesus Himself used touch as a way to heal and bring life to people around Him. However, there is a whole world of touch beyond human contact, and I hope some of the ideas in the chapter will perhaps prompt you to think of other ways that touch might lead us to participate in God's

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glorious world. Sometimes a chapter will even have overlapping senses, or a brief allusion to a sense which is covered in full in a different chapter; perhaps in this, you might come to realize how readily the senses interact with each other, and how rarely we use only one sensory faculty at a time, but rather combine multiple aspects to engage with the world in a multifaceted way. Everything that I bring to bear in this book I offer only as a jumping-off point, a resource to empower your imagination to apply these ideas beyond what I say here. Remember, my desire is not to give you the answers but to help you gain the tools to imagine, to ponder, and to engage.

This book is not meant to be an *exclusive doctrinal statement* about the senses, nor is it meant to be read as a theological treatise. I hope this book speaks to you in the space that you already inhabit, to encourage you to put into practice sensory rhythms right where you are. Like you, I come from a particular theological space, and I most certainly bring what I have learned in that space to bear in this book. However, I mention thinkers, writers, and artists both within and outside my tradition, including people from various backgrounds—Orthodox, Catholic, Evangelical, Calvinist, and beyond. Each of these thinkers has a unique viewpoint to offer, and each has influenced the way I think about my own faith. I am better for the breadth of their influence. I hope that in the same way, as you read this book, no matter your tradition, you will find meaningful ideas that resonate with your theological practice and help it to grow.

Finally, this book is not meant to provide a definitive answer of how we experience the divine through our senses. *Now, just wait a second*, you say. *What kind of trickery is this? Isn't that phrase in the very subtitle of this book?* Am I playing games, trying to sell you a bill of goods? Let me try to explain: This book is full of concepts that get at the idea of what a theology of the senses might be about. But I want you, dear reader, to hear me when I say that this book is only a starting point. And it *must* be that; for if the senses are to be our guide in encountering Jesus in a unique way, then you must take what you learn in these pages and put it into practice through your *experience*. The senses are their own sort of communication about God's presence in the world, a communication that is different than what can be related through words and ideas; they communicate through *encounter*. We use our minds to grasp complicated theories and tenets of faith, but if our senses in some way lead us to a knowledge of, or encounter with, the living God, then no words I can say here can express what can only be had through the knowledge which your sensory experience tells you. I can give you a perfect theoretical model for a theology of the senses, but unless you activate your senses and engage them in the trenches of the tangible world around you, seeking to find and respond to the presence of Christ there, this book will be for naught. I hope the fleeting taste you receive in this book will only serve to leave you hungry for much more and send you out into the world to dine at the rich table of the feast God has laid before our senses.

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The wonderful thing is, your senses are already engaged with God's world in a million ways every day. From the people with whom you interact to the nature around you, from the meals you eat to the music which you listen to, it is my hope that this book will give you the *clarity to identify* the points of contact with the sensory world that shape your life on a day-to-day basis; the *insight to discern* how each of those areas might open up an interaction with the creator of the world who is speaking through His creation; and most importantly, the *courage to engage* with those points of contact and behold the glory of God through them.

Now that you know the scope of the journey, I invite you to join me. Let's go get some dirt under our fingernails.

1

LET BEAUTY AWAKEN

The Glory of God in the Stuff of the World



The earth is full of thresholds where beauty
awaits the wonder of our gaze.

JOHN O'DONOHUE

I was able to taste the heat before I felt it. There had been a hint of it in the air even with the air-conditioning blasting, and when my father turned off the car, it took mere seconds for the sweltering warmth to ooze into our car. It was a sticky taste, full of dirt and cedar and pond water; and soon, it was to become as familiar as a breath.

My family had moved to the middle of nowhere. Well, actually, the middle of Texas. Locals would say that if you took a pin and stuck it right in the middle of a map of Texas, you'd hit Walnut Springs. Right there in the no-man's-land between the soft, verdant landscape of East Texas and the striking desert spread of West Texas, Bosque County

stubbornly held the gap as the unnoticed, ungainly sister between the two. And it was to this perceived limbo that my family moved, to live near my grandmother.

Of course, as a seven-year-old, I wasn't old enough to discern one sort of landscape from another, or put a value judgement on heat so palpable you could chew it up and swallow it. For me, everything was delightfully new: a sprawling ranch house, with an attic sufficiently large to allow my child-sized imagination room to romp around, instead of our previous house, a colonial structure that looked like every other two-story box on the street. The land behind that rancher, a veritable country in itself, was contained only by the barbed-wire boundaries at the edges of the two-hundred acres that comprised my grandmother's property.

There wasn't one part of those two hundred acres that I didn't love with my whole heart. My siblings and I would romp around the "tank"—a man-made fishing pond—with raucous glee, never managing to stay dry for any extended period of time. On other occasions, we'd amble down the dirt road stretching from our home to the back of the property, skirting around the deep ruts carved out by tires and fossilized into hardened molds by the elements. Once there, we'd veer from the road, taking a stealthy excursion through the tall Texas grass, always wary of snakes and other hidden critters. Finally, we'd go down the small, red dirt path, across the stream, and up the slippery embankment, where we'd arrive at our cabin.

The cabin rested on top of a small ledge, about five feet

above the water, though to my child eyes, it appeared to be dozens of feet in a vertical climb. It was a strangely arresting affair: The tiny box structure was composed of beams of crackly cedar all put one over the other, materials which we children had salvaged from a timber pile meant for fence-posts. The roof was a makeshift project consisting of a variety of dried grasses, which in the summer, always preserved enough pollen to reduce me to sneezing fits. There was no insulation, with gaping holes like lopsided prison bars appearing from the inside. But our cabin was hardly a prison; to us, it was a fortress, a place of security, joy, and happiness. Here we would make our homestead, our establishment. It was a small feat to the untrained eye, but to the expert eyes of a child, it was a masterpiece of architecture.

In those two summers before we moved back to the city, we explored and conquered every field, tree, and body of water and claimed it in the name of childhood. Our feet plunged through water and into squelching mud; our hands took hold of limestone and cedar, climbing and crawling our way through the adventures of undiscovered landscape; the heat of midday would distill into beads on our forehead, and just when it felt unbearable, a warm wind from nowhere would whisk across our faces in astonishing refreshment. When we grew weary of such toilsome exercises, we would retire to our fortress in the woods, where we would engage in a world of imagination, wild and set apart from the safe places of the world.

If you could have listened, you would have heard every field crying out in joy and all the trees clapping their hands

in wonder and amazement at our childhood feats. I think the grass itself just might have bowed down in awe of the innocence and pure child delight that we exuded. Every shout for joy, every relishing of a rock or stream or tree was an unconscious act of praise on my part. My heart rose in thanksgiving for the beauty I beheld in each corner of creation in our little patch of Texas soil, and even if I wasn't yet able to speak the name hidden within every encounter of that glory, I knew, in my innermost parts, that it was true.

The beauty of nature has always held me firmly in its grasp. When I feel distant from the world, lost, and alone, I often plunge myself back into the midst of creation and listen for the voice on the wind that called to me as a child. I loved it with my whole heart when I was young, even though the singer of the song of nature was still hidden from me then. As I have grown older, the light of that glory has become cast in the shade of adult troubles, of financial challenges and family tragedies, of professional setbacks and private failures. The story of the gospel, of the death which sin brings and the life found in salvation, which felt so inconsequential as a child, has captured me. I find myself wrapped up in that narrative in a way I can't escape, in a way that has shaped me and drawn me to seek the light that redemption brings. The propositional truth of Christianity has become my story, an ordering of the world which rings as true as a church bell.

And yet, there is a part of me that knows I can only believe these things to be true because I have experienced the

goodness of them all my life through the means of beauty. The song of nature has never left me void, and while pain and the experience of a broken world has compelled me to learn the name of the one who saves, I had already met Him long ago, in my childhood, and I still encounter Him day by day in the song of nature. When I was a child, my praise was an unspoken rising of the heart for the song sung by a hidden singer; now the singer has a name: Jesus.

The Singer of the Song of Creation

Jesus is the source of all beauty. In Him, creation had its beginning, and by turns, we, as His creation, were made to bear His image to the world. Just like all of creation, we, as created beings of God, are a physical manifestation of His love. This is a reflection of God's very nature, mirroring the Trinity itself: an eternal heavenly Father who, through the creativity of the Son and by the breath of the Spirit, transfigured a divine idea into the fullness of creation, a creation which finds its purpose and continuation in the incarnate Christ. John's Gospel begins with this in cosmic terms, echoing the beginning of the creation sequence in Genesis, in what some argue is the form of a hymn:

In the beginning the Word already existed.

The Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

He existed in the beginning with God.

SENSING GOD

God created everything through him,
and nothing was created except through him.
The Word gave life to everything that was created,
and his life brought light to everyone.¹

Look at the way the text guides us from the eternal, universal reality of God down to the particularity of our time and space: First is the eternal Word, Christ, affirmed in His divinity; through Christ comes the magnificence of the created universe; and then, within that cosmos, humans are brought to life, participating in the one who illuminates that cosmos.

And when we were lost in our sin, Jesus, the Word who made the world, came into that world and became *part of it*. The work of salvation is on this cosmic scale because Jesus saved us, not by rescuing us *from the world*, but by *becoming part of it*. Jesus, as John so boldly puts it, is the *Logos*, the *Word*—an abstract thought, a concept—made *flesh*—tangible, existing in space and time, touchable, knowable. Before His crucifixion, death, resurrection, and ascension, before His miraculous earthly ministry, before His remarkable childhood and the dazzling events surrounding His birth—before any element of Jesus' life on earth, the first sign of God's salvation in Jesus is His incarnation, His taking on our flesh, the atoms and molecules of our existence, brought to life in the womb of His earthly mother. Jesus came into the midst of our time and space, stepping out of eternity into the very creation within which He brought us into being, and that in itself is a profound sign of redemptive love.

LET BEAUTY AWAKEN

The apostle Paul echoes this extravagant connection between Christ and His masterful creation in the first chapter of Colossians, another passage also thought to perhaps be a hymn:

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.
He existed before anything was created and is supreme
 over all creation . . .
Everything was created through him and for him.
He existed before anything else,
 and he holds all creation together.²

Paul doesn't let us escape his intended point, affirming twice that Jesus, as the origin of created existence, brings forth creation from His own essence, and that it continues to be sustained because of His presence within it. Creation is Jesus' own word, made into the flesh of the natural world. From microbes to galaxies, every corner of creation bears the imprint of its master artist. And just as John shows us, this activity isn't limited to that first act of creative expression through which we and the whole world came into being but is continued in God's redemption of the whole of creation in Jesus:

through him God reconciled
 everything to himself.
He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth
 by means of Christ's blood on the cross.³

Through Jesus, not only has God saved us from the consequences of our sin; in Jesus, the dying heart of a broken universe is being reversed. Creation is beautiful because it points to the beautiful one; the Father loves what His Son has created, and through His Son, He is making peace with “*everything* in heaven *and on earth*.” What Jesus accomplished on the cross was more than a simple saving of souls. It was a reaffirmation all over again, hearkening back to that very moment of the creation of the universe, that what God has created is *very good* and is worth redeeming.

Christian storytellers have often been captivated by this relationship between God, creation, and redemption. One of the great Christian writers of the twentieth century, J. R. R. Tolkien, produced an imaginative interpretation of creation in his fantasy volume *The Silmarillion*. He imagined the world as a song sung by God, a metaphor which, as we will learn in chapter four, is as old as Christian faith itself.

In the opening pages of his epic history of his mythical world Middle Earth, Tolkien describes the creation of the universe by Illúvatar, who brought everything into being through a grand and glorious musical symphony. To his angelic servants, the Ainur, he gave the power to participate in that musical masterpiece by co-creating in harmony with Illúvatar’s song. But one of the servants of Illúvatar, Melkor, was jealous of Illúvatar and attempted to make his own music, which quickly came into discord with Illúvatar’s song, bringing strife into the good, true, and beautiful theme. Melkor seeks to drown out the beautiful theme of Illúvatar’s creation.

To this violence and cacophony, Illúvatar responds to Melkor:

And thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me . . . For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined.⁴

Illúvatar makes clear that not only can the musical theme of creation which he has brought into being not be drowned out or destroyed, but even that which was intended for evil he will weave back into his theme for good.

The world God has created is not incidental to our redemption; it is precisely through the world He has created that He redeems it, by becoming part of it and consecrating it once again through His Son. In Jesus, we see the world with new eyes, for the God beyond our imagination has entered our universe. He has reclaimed the song of creation and woven it back into Himself.

If this is true, then the gospel becomes more than simply knowing the truth about Jesus intellectually, or even developing a relationship with Him spiritually. Though both of those things are truly good and necessary for a healthy walk with God, this understanding of the incarnation carries one more implication: that we behold Jesus' beauty *in His created world*, and that we become co-conspirators in the great work of manifesting that beauty in our day-to-day lives. We must

learn to listen to Jesus' song in His world and become singers of it in turn. If the beauty within creation points us to the beautiful one, then when we fail to behold and respond to that beauty, we hide ourselves from Him.

Christ is the answer to the desires which emerge from our deepest parts. We long for beauty because we long for the one who is the source of beauty and who calls us back to life through the means of beauty in our lives. When we sin, it is often not that desire itself is wrong, but rather, that it is not aimed toward the only thing that can satisfy. Think of the seven deadly sins, alluded to in various parts of Scripture and brought into a more formal structure by the church fathers, sins in which, as the writer of Hebrews says, we become "so easily entangle[d]" (12:1, NIV). Lust emerges from the disorientation of the godly desire to consummate love, born from a self-giving which has been twisted into self-adulation. Pride is the disorientation of the rightful desire to belong, born out of a loss of the inward knowledge that we are God's children, sealed in His love. Wrath is a disorientation of the desire to be safe, born from a loss of the inward assurance of God's providence. Every sort of sin is desire for that which satisfies, that which delights, that which is beautiful, but cast away from its proper end in Jesus.

When we encounter sin in ourselves or others, our job is not to destroy the desire that was twisted and broken or downplay the potential longing for beauty within that misplaced affection, but rather to restore each to its proper alignment in Christ. How do we do this? By beholding the

beauty of God's life in the world breaking through broken places, and by letting it shine out again in turn. It is precisely through those broken, imperfect longings that Jesus works His most spectacular feats of redemption, not by destroying them but by restoring them. The great songwriter Leonard Cohen powerfully grasps this work of grace in his song "Anthem": "Ring the bell that still can ring / Forget your perfect offering / There is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in."⁵

Beauty, reoriented to the good and true God, revitalizes, softens, and restores, taking our broken desires and drawing them back into union with Him. When our hearts were stone, Jesus gave us hearts of flesh, because incarnation is always at the center of His work of salvation. First in Him, as the "firstfruits" of salvation, as 1 Corinthians 15:23 (NIV) tells us; and now, in us through Him.

Copying the Master Painter

In the Italian Renaissance, apprenticeship programs would place young men in the context of a master artist, a craftsman of the highest skill, who would relate his knowledge to his apprentice. The apprentice would live with the painter, first gaining a basic knowledge of materials, styles, and methods of application, and then later gaining an intimate understanding of the master's ways: his brush strokes, the way he contrasted light with shadow, the methods he used for proportion and substance. They would learn how to transform

their artwork from something that would merely intrigue to something which might transform, something which would draw an observer in and change their understanding of the world. While the apprentice would likely eventually graduate onward up the artistic hierarchy of the time, they would always carry with them the gift of their master's style and technique. If they gained success and acclaim, it would be in large part because they had learned to apply their master's technique in their own, unique way.

We are apprentices of a master artist as well. When we set out to create, we do so in His style, by copying His technique. What are the hallmarks of the technique of our master artist?

We see them embedded in the world around us. Nature is our first sign of it: ordered symmetry and proportional harmony, in everything from pine cones to galaxies; sympathetic harmonic overtones, which align into exquisite harmonies; landscapes of breathtaking grandeur, which draw us into an engagement with the transcendent; vast distances between stars and planets, which express to us the limitlessness of the one who places those stars in the sky; light, which filters gently through leaves in summer or reflects off of waves breaking on the shore, which shines in the darkness and which the darkness cannot comprehend.

And that grand ocean of glory in the wide universe trickles down into everything that we experience day to day: the delight and glory of a beautiful melody; the enchantment of light as it shimmers through stained glass; the restorative

kindness of a gentle embrace; the sudden, arresting joy of a fragrant aroma; the nourishing warmth of a good meal. Whether on a cosmic scale or in the mundane moments of our everyday existence, this divine expressivity presses out in every corner of our lives. As the coming chapters will reveal, every sensory encounter provides us a different way to engage with this artistry: Our interaction with music, whether listening or singing or composing, might become a way to emulate the symphonic mastery of a universe which harmonically unifies great diversity with great unity; visual art might allow us to express the way in which the world presses out with the illumination of the divine and becomes a means through which we are seen and consecrated by the God who has turned His face toward us; the sense of touch, and the capacity to give it as a gift to others, might recall to mind how God entered this world as one of us and gave His life as a gift of healing for all; and taste and aroma bring us into the awareness of the abundance with which the world overflows, a plenitude which blesses and nourishes our lives, in the same way that God's overflowing goodness is given to us as a free gift of grace.

In these ways, we are able to imitate the creative work of our master and more readily reveal His love and grace to the world around us. The more we behold Jesus' beauty in His own creation, and the more we bear witness to that beauty through our own emulation of our master artist, the more we bring the glorious light of the gospel into brighter clarity.

When We Miss the Glory

The two ideas we've discussed so far—that we are meant to behold Jesus' beauty in the world as a sign of His redemptive work and are then meant to reveal that beauty to others—aren't only valuable; they are invaluable. Seeing Christ for who He is and bearing witness to His loveliness is imperative for knowing Him and learning to love Him. The apostle Peter learned this the hard way.⁶

He had already been rebuked once. Mere days before going up on the mountain with Jesus, James, and John, he had told his Lord he would never allow the authorities to take Jesus and harm Him. Jesus had reprimanded him as “Satan,” a statement that planted a fear deep in his heart. He was afraid of what might happen to the Master, and even more afraid of what the Master might *allow* to happen.

Thus, when he saw Jesus shining out in glorious, blinding light on the mountain, and the fear rose up within him again, his intention to understand, to make sense of what was before him, kicked right back in. Here was a moment of divine revelation, with the very heroes of the Jewish people, Moses and Elijah, joining them there. Peter's mind raced; perhaps they needed to build tabernacles for Moses and Elijah, usher this profound vision into the midst of the people. Maybe Jesus wouldn't have to suffer after all. Maybe there was a way to triumph *and* prove their enemies wrong. Perhaps this is what the vision meant; if he could define it, understand it, perhaps then the fear would melt away once more.

He had only just started to speak when a thunderous voice from above decimated any remaining words within him, rendering him as silent and still as the grave. *This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!* Peter knelt, humiliated and terrified, not knowing what to think or say. He knew now that everything he had imagined about Jesus was too small, inconsequential. Perhaps for the first time, the reality of this man's true identity began to seep into him, the bright whiteness searing the edges of his consciousness. The voice had commanded him to listen to Jesus, and now, Jesus' troubling words came back to him in a rush. What Jesus had predicted of His own death frightened Peter deeply, but in a way, this new understanding of Jesus, as the glorified one, waiting to be raised up, put an even deeper fear in Peter. The vision of Jesus there between the two great prophets of old was beautiful beyond imagination, and Peter couldn't control it; he understood that now. He was meant to behold it, but he wasn't ready to behold such glory; it required nothing less than his transformation, a transformation not yet complete within him. And yet, as Peter crouched, hunched over and trembling, Jesus placed His hand on Peter's shoulder, bringing him back to his feet. "Get up; don't be afraid." Filled with unknowing, but holding the hand of his master, Peter began to descend the mountain.

You see, we are much like Peter. Much of our faith is wrapped up in constructing "tabernacles," spaces in which we can come to certain conclusions, have a sense of understanding. We have apologetics to help undergird the

reasonableness of Christian faith, and Bible-study tools to make sense of the Scripture we read. Often, the sermons we listen to are built around giving us a “takeaway,” and when we discuss our growth in faith, we articulate it through what we have *learned*, the life lessons we have gained. In short, our faith often revolves around the things we can comprehend and integrate into our lives in an orderly way. Is there anything fundamentally wrong with this sort of tabernacle construction? Absolutely not; on the contrary, the gospel is fundamentally the good news of Jesus. That good news must be expressed, both to ourselves and to others. It must be said explicitly. Without that knowledge, we lack the ability to articulate the very foundations of our faith.

And yet, knowledge is incomplete without a change of our hearts; this is because the one in whom we find “the hope of glory” is not a *what*, but a *who*.⁷ We are not made ultimately to understand God but to adore Him, to draw close to Him and participate in His glory through Jesus, as Romans 8:17 tells us. That sort of passion can’t be contained in understanding alone; it must allow itself to be carried forward in experience of the infinite, eternal God who has made Himself close to us in Christ. And God has given us our five senses to engage in that experience. Not only are our senses not something to spurn or regard suspiciously; instead, they are a very real and manifest means through which we draw close to our Lord, experience His glory.

Moses and Elijah understood; in their own lives, they had each been given the privilege of witnessing the very presence

of God up close. Moses was given a brief glance of God's "back," and the mere passing glimpse caused His face to shine in glory. Elijah was given the incredible privilege of participating in that glory, riding a chariot of fire into heaven itself. In the transfiguration, they stood as witnesses, testifying to the transforming power of simply beholding God's beauty.

Peter's failure was a failure to *behold beauty*. In his intent to create a narrative that made sense of the phenomenon before him, he failed to allow the glory before him to transform him. You see, when we behold Jesus' beauty through the sensory points of contact in the world around us, it begins to change our hearts. It plants that unspoken Word—that incorporeal idea from before time itself—in our very being, Christ incarnated in us. To behold God's glory in the world He has created is to allow Jesus to transfigure us by planting His glorious transfiguration light in our hearts.

And just as the transfiguration was the vision of what Jesus would become through His death and resurrection, so Jesus within us is also a sort of transfiguration, a vision to others of what each of us will one day be when heaven and earth are restored to perfect unity in Him. When we engage with Jesus' beauty in the world around us, and allow it to shape us, we bear the beauty of that transfigured light within us, shining like a beacon in a dark world. In so doing, we invite Christ's incarnational power to flow into us and exponentially onward into every corner of our world. Every part of our lives, from the luminous to the mundane—even our day-to-day tabernacle moments—might be transfigured,

shining as a testament to the one whom each of those elements is meant to glorify: Jesus.

Thinning the Veil

This is because Jesus isn't only the source and the sustenance of beauty. He is also the *end* of beauty, the final point toward which all our desires as Christians are aligned. From our journey thus far, we know that through Jesus' incarnation, life, and death on the cross, eternity stepped into time, declaring God's creation worth redeeming. But in Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the places are swapped, and time is drawn into eternity. Jesus, the perfect man, more holistically human than we in our imperfect humanness can imagine, rose bodily into heaven, carrying His incarnated flesh into eternity, declaring that not only is creation *good*, it is *destined for redemption*. Our witness of beauty in the here and now is a foretaste of what is coming someday, and when we celebrate that beauty and give it back to our hurting world, we not only honor Jesus, but also create a touchpoint for the eternal, making it palpable in our present moment.

Every time we cherish a beautiful sunset or relish a cool wind on our face, whenever we bask in the glory of sunlight or delight in the restoring grace of rain—every instance in which we reckon with God's beautiful created world and our heart rises in praise—not only are we *beholding* Jesus' hidden presence, we are also *declaring* it to be a faithful promise of what is yet to come.

Though we are still in the broken place, waiting in sorrow behind the veil that sin has woven out of death, when we behold Jesus' beauty, the weave grows just a bit more threadbare. We create what the ancient Celts called "thin places," points where the divide between heaven and earth grows less defined, and we are able to catch a glimpse of our final hope. Each time we allow Christ's beauty to take hold in our lives, we become a living testimony toward what is often called the "Beatific Vision," the moment when that veil of death is torn in two forever, and we behold Christ face-to-face in His resurrection glory. If we learn to behold Christ's beauty in each part of our lives as Christians in the time and space within which God has placed us—right here, right now, moment by moment—every engagement of our senses toward experiencing Jesus' glory can be a promise toward the day we all long for, the day in which our desires and the fulfillment of those desires will no longer be separated, a time when we will behold Him, the beautiful one, face-to-face for all of eternity.

Even now, so far separated from my childhood days in the heat of a Texas summer, I still believe that the trees in the fields are clapping their hands, and the grass bows down in worship. I believe, with the psalmist, that "The heavens proclaim the glory of God,"⁸ and that "their message has gone throughout the earth."⁹ Often in my distraction, uncertainty, and confusion, I fail to recognize, forget to look up, miss the glory; and yet, when, by grace, my eyes are raised again, and I catch the strains of that cosmic harmony, I realize that the song of glory in the world has never ceased. And in that

realization, I know in my heart that their praise is not simply a spectacle, something for me to observe; it is a challenge, an admonition: Will you join in the song? Will you, too, give praise to the one through whom all things came to be, and in whom all things will be put to rights again?

COMMON SENSES

- Look through the Psalms for five to ten statements that the psalmists make about creation. How do they describe creation? The relationship between God and nature? Do the psalmists portray God's presence in nature, and if so, how? How might the psalmists' words about creation change the way you think about creation?
- Take a walk near where you live. Identify at least three things that are beautiful or delightful—anything from flowers, to birdsong, to freshly mown grass, to the smell of tacos from your favorite taco shop! As you recognize each beautiful thing, let your heart say a small prayer of thanks.