

Year B 1 Christmas 2008

“Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice.”
AMEN.

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

Peter Gomes says, “We are saved by our metaphors and not by our metaphysics. We are saved by the pictures we draw, the images we create, the symbols that have been offered to us and that we offer to others. We are saved by our metaphors and not by our metaphysics, which means that we offer salvation not through our explanations but through the invitation to an experience.”

John’s Gospel begins with an extraordinary hymn, an idea, a metaphor. While it is beautiful and elegant to hear, it is a mysterious metaphor. It begins with an idea that starts linguistically. What God does is God’s deed, God’s created reality. What God says—whatever that actually conveys—God’s speaking is God’s speech. When God acts, the result is a noun, an action—but God’s acting in the world is a speech and that speech, the speech into reality, is Jesus.

Usually God is described as an amorphous one who acts, an actor, without parts or being, and John describes the breath of that being resulting in solid corporeal breath. Think of those old-fashioned cartoons of a face blowing air (like the strong wind of a hurricane) and at the end of the pictured blown breath, instead of just those parallel lines of the breath, there is gathered a solid not frozen breath, but a person, like Athena coming not out of Zeus’s forehead, but solidifying from Zeus’s blown breath. People have attempted words and

pictures through the ages, but the concept is easy to say, but simply hard to understand.

John is describing the same mystery as Luke describes, when he describes the Holy Spirit overshadowing Mary, and resulting in the baby Jesus. That picture is close enough to something imaginable—except of course, for the point Mary makes—how can this be? John's attempt is more metaphorical and more theological. He says that when God speaks, the resulting speech is Jesus. God breaches the distance between divinity and divine intention, and humanity and human reality and specificity.

The image of God as impassive and distant becomes passionate and present. Instead of God being a force and a mind and animating spirit, Christians say God became not only one of us humans. God became one particular human and lived one human life. The how question has always remained unsatisfied, because the enormity of the concept of more than the creator, but the infinity of whatever we mean by the idea of God, became particular, not just in the creation, but in a life lived as a human.

Any discussion of the idea goes around in tautologies or almost word play—or ends up in more metaphor, more poetry. Carole-Jean Smith writes:

a wreath
 on the door
 a gift in bright papers
 and candles candles
 these articulate a love story
 about the obstinate loneliness of space
 and time about a breach of the garden wall
 and an impossible cohabitation
 these tell of the great

Christmas yes

Somehow that “yes” of the “impossible cohabitation” of God in humankind is both impossible and yet real fact.

In John’s great hymn, this first sentence continues which both encapsulates the idea of the incarnation and surrounds an impenetrable mystery, which we struggle to explain and re-word. John, the Gospel writer, talks about John the one who comes before the One to announce him. We get that part. John the Gospel-writer is describing the person we call John the Baptist, and says that he too was sent from God to testify to the light. The word light is used seven times, to overwhelm darkness said only twice. The Christmas day reading of John’s Gospel ends with “and we have seen the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth, but today’s Christmas 1 reading continues. Again John testifies and cries out and witnesses to Jesus coming after him to rank ahead of him because he was before him. The gospel writer acknowledges that law came through Moses, but he asserts that grace and truth came through Jesus. His point is that no one has seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made God known.

Instead of more metaphor and more theology, this is a simple idea. Somehow Jesus in being close to the God’s heart can make God known to people in heart, in friendship. Think of those ads for New York: I heart New York. The writer says when God hearts as an action, the resulting heart is Jesus who interacts with us in friendship in heart.

Again Carole-Jean Smith says it better for us in her poetry:

God so loved the world
 loved it, loved it, loved it
 all that glistening protein and the wormholes

tunneling in and out of everywhere and those electrons
 Whoo—ee! like a restless boardgame,
 loved it especially in the rain, loved
 the time gliding in and out
 of gravity and free will like blood entangling
 everything, loved it so much
 that she set aside time
 to be born into it as a little Jewish boy sliding
 onto a surface soft with roots and herbs.

Metaphor over metaphysics, and image over concept to explain, describe, surround, sketch out, that invitation to an on going repeated experience offered over and over to each of us. We'll get the idea for a minute,, a glimpse into the Stable light burning and then the idea seems not only conceptually unimaginable, but we can't imagine either God as active and real, or human and involved with us as individuals as we are. In the Advent proper preface, we pray to be ready so that when he comes, we may without shame or fear greet him. We're often ready to believe that God acts in the world to judge, particularly punishingly, but not that God arrives in a person close to God's heart to be with us. We're ready and willing to be judged, when we feel unworthy, but are intimidated by the idea that God comes, in love to and for us. Of that we surely are not worthy. That's the point. Since God found that God couldn't get into us enough to convince us of God's involved love in us, with us, for us, God had to be one of us. Being us God lived the life we stumble over and out of, but God didn't stumble. God enters into our lives to demonstrate the reality of the closeness of God's heart for us and in us— an impossible cohabitation.

The early, unknown medieval writer of *The Cloud of Unknowing* describes the reality that the closer we get to the mystery, the more impenetrable and large it becomes for us. We can enter that cloud, but we cannot plumb the cloud. Sometimes it just seems easier to accept blame and judgment, but it is God's love, God's heart that comes to us in life's closeness. God comes over and over, always bring that heart's warmth and concern, that identification with us and empathy for us." Been there, done that" is God's word. We listen annually to this profound simplicity. We sing the metaphors musicians have written for our help, and we hear poets use metaphor and image to tell again that old, old story of Jesus and his love. We are often clueless about what it means, or what is even said or meant, but we reach for it and hope and trust it as Good News.

AMEN.

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