“The Image of the Invisible God” by John Morris

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The 23 Sunday after Pentecost

This sermon is going to be about poetic language, and how we talk about God, and a little bit about my own struggles to find words for a life-changing experience.

I’ve had pretty good success as a poet, though I took it up comparatively late in life, when I was nearly 40. As everyone knows, poets are annoying, because they never quite say what they mean – or else they do, but you can’t tell what they mean – or they kind of laugh at you behind your back for even asking What does it mean? or caring about such boring questions at all. Archibald MacLeish wrote (in a poem, of course), “A poem should not mean but be,” and Robert Frost, when asked at a reading what a certain poem of his meant, proceeded to read it again.

As a working poet, I sympathize with MacLeish and Frost, because I too am more concerned with expression and emotion than I am with meaning as such. But I also sympathize with annoyed audience members, for two reasons: First, I myself don’t much care for poems that leave me feeling stupid, as if there’s a secret code I’m not getting. And second, I believe that even the most poetic language is still striving to convey a meaning – it’s just not a literal one.

This takes us to talk about God, and a phrase like “the image of the invisible God,” which is the theme for our new season. On the face of it, that’s a quote from Colossians, referring to Jesus. But I think it can also refer to a whole world of images, a rich and essential vocabulary that we use to try to

express this invisible, inaudible, impalpable God. I'm thinking especially of metaphor.

As many of us remember from English class, a metaphor is a statement or description for one thing that refers to another thing in order to show or suggest that they are similar. So how might an image, which is visible, be similar to God, which is . . . well, not visible, to say the least?

Consider Jesus himself, whom Paul calls "an image." Is Jesus a metaphor? If we took a poll of the people listening to me right now, I bet we'd find quite a range of opinion on that. Some would no doubt uphold the traditional creedal statement: Jesus is God, in the mystery of the Trinity – nothing metaphorical about it. Others might prefer the idea that, indeed, Jesus is an image, a kind of living metaphor: We compare two unlike things, a human being and the creator of the universe, and assert that they are in fact alike, that they share some crucial identity. And there are infinite gradations and elaborations of these polarities of belief – again, I doubt whether any two of us in this room this morning would see it exactly the same way. My point is only that, without recourse to the idea of metaphor, we are left with a language about God that is terribly impoverished.

Because it's not only Jesus who can be seen as a metaphor. Let's turn to this morning's reading from Timothy. I'm going to read it again, and invite you to count the metaphors as they occur. I'll give you big hints by raising my eyebrows and pausing significantly before each one. Here we go:

As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come.

> *4:7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.*
>
> *4:8 From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give*

me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

4:16 At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them!

4:17 But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth.

4:18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

I counted eight definite metaphors – how about you? Moreover, there are at least a couple more uses of language that might count as metaphoric. For instance, "time of my departure." You may believe that we literally depart for somewhere when we die, or you may believe that this is a metaphor for the unknown and unknowable reality of what happens after death. Similarly, "the Lord will rescue me from every evil attack" might be taken literally – perhaps there is genuine divine rescue when evil attacks me – or it might be a metaphor for the providence of God, for our certainty that good comes out of evil, eventually, no matter how dire our predicament is.

It seems to me that, like poets, writers who talk about God can hardly write a single sentence without using metaphor – that is, without saying things that are not literally true, but nevertheless convey a deep truth and, dare I say it, meaning, which is apparent to anyone who's paying attention. I know for certain that this is how poetry works, since I've written so much of it, and I strongly suspect that religious language works the same way.

OK, very short digression into philosophy – I promise, I've timed it, it's two minutes. Nearly a hundred years ago, there

was a very influential group of philosophers who articulated something that a lot of people, especially scientists, had been thinking ever since the Enlightenment: that if a statement is not literally true, it's either false or meaningless. And of course, if you think about, that's an excellent rule to follow in science, or logic, or mathematics, and maybe history too, and certainly in a lot of areas of our daily lives. If you ask your kid if she broke the lamp, and she tries to palm you off with a metaphor, you're going to tell her, Cut the crap, tell me the truth, did you or didn't you?

However, no sooner did this group of philosophers – they were called the Vienna Circle, or sometimes logical positivists – argue for this idea, than it was shown to be incorrect. I'll skip the technical details, and just assert that no contemporary philosopher any longer believes what this group proposed, but rather, there's general agreement that language does a number of jobs, depending upon what we're trying to achieve, and that "truth" or "meaning" cannot be limited to statements that can be verified scientifically.

As I said, this was pretty convincingly demonstrated by the middle of the past century. But there are still what you might call hangovers from that very seductive idea – that truth has got to be literal, scientific truth. What I'm calling a hangover casts a shadow over how a lot of people view religious language. For non-believers, a persistent argument against religion comes down to this: the Bible, and the stuff that preachers and believers say, is all nonsense, or contradictory, or scientifically false. It's a relic from a superstitious era, before we knew how the world really works. Back then, you could assert anything, and there was no way to show whether it was true or false. But we're past that stage now, so we can confidently reject religious language; it's just not true.

And, for believers, here's their version of the hangover:

Well, if the only truth is literal truth, scientific truth, then the Bible and the words of preachers and believers must be literally true. So God really did make the world in seven real days, and Noah really did survive a flood that destroyed all life on earth, and . . . well, you get the picture. Literalism about language does one of two things: It either gives nonbelievers a reason to reject talk about God, or it gives believers a reason to insist that talk about God has to be literally true.

Now I don't subscribe to either of those positions, because I'm a poet, and if I was stuck with using only literal language, I'd be out of work. To me, language about God and the spirit runs the gamut: Some of it I do believe to be literal truth, but a great deal more is metaphoric, imagistic, poetic – but no less true. And of course there's no clear dividing line, and my opinions about which is which are constantly changing. One of the things I love about Seekers is that we welcome people who are all over the map in terms of how much they believe God-talk and Jesus-talk to be metaphorical, and how much literally true.

For the last part of this sermon, I want to tell you about why I started writing poetry seriously. I hope that by doing so, I can suggest some ideas about why metaphor and poetic language are so central to our efforts to talk about God.

In the early 90s I had a friend named Mark Reynolds. He wasn't my best friend, or even a very good friend, just a fellow writer whom I knew and liked and enjoyed socializing with. At that time I only wrote short stories and essays, no poetry. Mark was ill with HIV for all the time I knew him, and soon enough – because this was the early 90s – he began dying. I became part of a quite large community of friends who seemed to assemble themselves organically around Mark, to help him and ease his passage.

Two of the most powerful experiences of my life followed. The

first was the witnessing of this very community – the extraordinary and holy power of people gathered together in the name of kindness and love and concern. As the AIDS plague killed its hundreds of thousands of victims, these beautiful little communities were springing up everywhere, a spontaneous refusal to despair, an insistence on giving comfort and affirmation when the night was darkest, and ignorance and prejudice at their loudest. I was fortunate to be part of one. The other experience was more individual: Mark included me in a much smaller group that he turned to for spiritual comfort. My best guess about why is that, among Mark's friends, I was one of only a few practicing Christians, and Mark was too. So I found myself confronted with the way the Holy Spirit says Come, and you better come. I held Mark's hand as he trembled,

I said the 23rd psalm with him, I repeated to him the creeds of our church. I told him what I hoped was true: That he would have eternal life at the right hand of God. I was completely inadequate to this task; I did it anyway. For what it's worth, everyone else who prayed with him and listened to his anger and doubts and longings about God felt equally inadequate. But – as some people say around here – we were all in it together.

Mark died on February 19, 1994, and I was left with memories and new places of consciousness and spirituality that I wanted desperately to articulate. I felt I had been moved and changed by the experience. And of course I missed him terribly. But the words I've used today, just now, to try to explain why it was so important – you can see how unsuccessful they are. It's as if I'm describing the surface, or the dimensions, of it, without being able to actually show what it meant. And that was exactly what I felt 20 years ago, when I tried to write about it. As a prose writer, I couldn't do it. What I did have, though, was a journal I'd kept throughout Mark's final illness and death. And this journal did not attempt to explain or summarize anything. When I read it over, I found that it contained details, incidents, stories, people, ups and downs, confusions and joys. Somehow I had the idea that I could use

the journal entries to write poems about what I had just gone through.

Suddenly I was a poet – the verse was pouring out, every day. I didn't worry about whether they were any good, or what "style" of poetry they were. I just created metaphor after metaphor, image upon incident upon memory, to try to get inside the experience, to tell the truth and try to show what it meant. This is how and why I became a poet. The poems were attempts to use language to say something true that cannot be said with literal truths. Here's my personal definition of what poetry is: Words that are about one thing, but mean another. Which is so close to a definition of metaphor that they might as well be the same.

And isn't this also how it is with religious language? We are at a loss for words, our ordinary language isn't up to the task – so we reach and stretch and try to say what is true about God . . . but not literally true. The meaning lies elsewhere, beyond fact and analysis and even logic.

We all know that the most powerful poetry is the poetry that hits readers right in the guts, the spine, the heart. And I think the same is true of religious language. It's so easy to forget that Paul and the Gospel writers and the Psalmists were writing about experiences and ideas that had knocked them for a loop – had rattled every emotional center they had. Sometimes the language, due to its datedness, no longer conveys this, which is one reason I'm grateful for new translations of Scripture. The other problem is sheer familiarity: We are so used to the famous, often-repeated language of the Bible that it becomes drained of its astonishment and horror, its fear and joy. So let me end with an excerpt from a poem by a modern-day Psalmist, the great John Berryman:

*Master of beauty, craftsman of the snowflake….**

Amen.

*(“Eleven Addresses to the Lord,” section 1, by John Berryman from Collected Poems (Farrar Straus Giroux). The full text of this poem may be found at http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2001/09/19)