

Divine Improvisation – Human Wonder

From the series: Cosmic Symphony

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 9; John 1:1-14

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Sometimes when I reflect on what I try to communicate to you by way of writing or preaching, I question myself. I realize that I am on a fascinating quest that never quits. Always, always I am trying to understand, understand the Mystery of God, the mystery of the human being, and then it strikes me that that is really the same quest. Do I not try to understand God, the nature of Reality, because I am trying to understand myself, my human nature, the meaning of human being?

Sometimes I question myself for dragging you along on my quest. I cannot help myself - these questions stalk my every waking moment and obtrude from my unconscious at times during sleep. But, certainly not everyone is dogged with that drivenness to search the mysteries of life.

When I doubt myself in the execution of my preaching/teaching ministry, I hear voices from the congregation say, "We really only want to know that God loves us and that in the end all will be well."

And then I am struck by the realization that that is precisely why I carry on my quest - am driven by the need to probe, to discover. It is because, more than anything else, I want to be able to say with honesty and conviction, God loves you; all will be well. For that reason, I keep thinking and letting you in on my own reflections.

We have inherited a faith tradition - the biblical story, Israel and Jesus, 2000 years of interpretive tradition - the Christian theological tradition. But all of it, the biblical story and the interpretive tradition, was shaped in terms of a conception of the world-creation and of God that we know is other than what is being discovered in our day. Our knowledge of the cosmos is exploding, it is awesome; it places the most brilliant scientists before Mystery. That knowledge, gained through the sciences, is always tentative, open-ended, constantly being confirmed or corrected, and that knowledge will not provide for us either proof or disproof of God and the mode of God's engagement with cosmic reality. But, what we learn from the sciences will make evident the conceptions of God and God's

working derived from pre-scientific ages that no longer speak to us, because they were based on an understanding of the world and its origin that has been rejected.

The conception of the cosmic reality, which our best knowledge provides, does not give a proof either of God's existence or non-existence, but it is the context of understanding within which we must finally understand our experience of God. Images of God and God's working which do not accord with our knowledge of reality will not be convincing or adequate.

Therefore, faith's understanding needs new language, new concepts, and new analogies. That is the task that drives me and, to the extent that you continue to tolerate me and even encourage me, I believe it is the gift we can bring to our world as a faith community.

A biblical scholar, John Knox, wrote something that struck me when first I read it and continues to keep me at the difficult and risky task in which I am engaged. He wrote,

For our hearts cannot finally find true what our minds find false. If they could, we should be hopelessly divided and any firm grasp of reality would be impossible. What we mean by "the heart" in this connection is not something alien or counter to the mind, but is the mind itself quickened and extended. The wisdom the heart has found, if it be wisdom and not fantasy, is the same wisdom the mind all the while has been feeling after, if haply it might find it. It is a wisdom which, far from bypassing the understanding, enters through the doors of it, fills and stretches the space of it, and only then breaks through and soars above it.

The Humanity and Divinity of Christ, p. 1

Perhaps another way of saying this is that the "heart" cannot find rest in a story or a symbol which our reason shows to be out of sync with our experience and knowledge of reality - not in accord with the reality we know from observation and rational reflection, or, again, we will not "rest" in that which our common sense rejects.

Given the fact that our knowledge of the physical universe, of the human being, of global human society, and of historical development in a global perspective has revolutionized our understanding of ourselves and the reality of which we are a part, our faith formulations must be translated into new language and conceptuality if they would continue to be compelling, convincing, meaningful and awe-inspiring into the Third Millennium.

If you are of my generation, you can perhaps live and die with inherited stories, symbols, and faith understanding. However, it is not just for ourselves, but for

our children and grandchildren that we must re-think the faith in order that they, too, might live in the assurance that God loves them and that all will be well.

Finding new language, a new translation of biblical faith does not mean that the tradition in which we have been nurtured did not point us to and connect us with reality, with God, that it did not provide a meaningful framework for understanding our human experience. It did that for the Christian community for all these centuries and still does so for millions. But the truth, the Reality to which our faith formulations point, is beyond those formulations and increasingly in the last three centuries those formulations have been shown to be inadequate; they no longer image reality as we are coming to know it through observation and scientific investigation.

In this situation a serious error has been committed by both the Academy and the Church: both tend to identify the symbols, the interpretive story, with the Reality itself. Thus as Science images a cosmos that is contradictory to the biblical story and symbol, Science tends toward atheism or the denial of God, while Religion grows defensive and engages in a futile effort to disprove the findings of Science.

Both efforts are wrong because both mistake the story/symbol for the reality itself. It is not the Reality – In this case, God - that is disproved, but simply the inadequacy of the interpretive story, the symbolic imaging, that no longer connects what we know from scientific investigation with what we experience of a transcendent reality as human beings.

How many years ago was it that the Mackinaw Bridge was built? I vaguely remember that, soon after it was opened, a car pulling a mobile home was overturned by a gust of wind while crossing the bridge. The occupants of the car said they feared the bridge was collapsing. But, the bridge was just fine. The storm overturned car and trailer *on* the bridge. But one can identify with the initial fear of those folks - thinking bridge and themselves were plunging into the sea.

So it is with our theological theories and explanations. New information shows them up as picturing the world or God or the human person in a manner not in accord with the reality discovered. But, that does not touch the reality of world or God or person. It simply calls for re-thinking, revising our conceptions, re-telling the old, old story.

In the re-telling, the tradition will be mined for stories and nuances forgotten or overlooked. Certain language heavy with sacred association will be retained but given new meaning in a new framework. The dismantling of old conceptuality is not to destroy, to leave barren, but to find a more adequate expression that will be resonant with a fresh authenticity.

Such an enterprise has always been going on and must ever continue. A reactionary defensiveness on the part of the Church always proves futile and

dangerous as religious leaders have not often trusted the people with full knowledge of the best information available, thinking that, by shielding them from advancing human knowledge, they will preserve them in the faith.

But to do so is dishonest and a disservice. James Fowler, the religious educator who defined the stages of faith development points out that often the Church itself is responsible for arrested spiritual development, keeping people stuck at the adolescent stage rather than calling people to maturity in Christ. To keep the people of God from maturity leaves them vulnerable to a David Koresh, a Jim Jones, to militant, violent fundamentalism.

And if we do not continually re-think our faith formulations in light of ongoing knowledge available to us, when we are confronted with such knowledge, there is often anger, the rage of having one's core beliefs disrupted and perhaps rage and rejection of the institution that misled, that failed to pass on an honest faith interpretation in light of the best knowledge available.

Let me add one more thought: Our traditional story has hints that point to the universality of God's grace, but we must honestly acknowledge that, in the wake of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, that early movement reflected in the New Testament documents shaped a religious tradition - Christianity - which has for the most part been exclusivistic. Once again parts of the Church will declare even now - Salvation by grace, but through Jesus Christ *alone*.

But today in our global society, where we have come to know other traditions and the people who worship God in those traditions, we simply must recognize that tribal conceptions of God and narrow religious traditions can no longer be pitted against each other. Not only does a rigid exclusivism no longer make sense, it is downright dangerous. Our world is too small, too inter-connected, too interdependent to allow the volatility of religion to fuel tribal, ethnic and national conflict.

If in the foregoing I give the rationale for my struggle to re-tell the story, I must move on now and attempt to speak of God in new imagery. I have been endeavoring to do that in these weeks since Pentecost, finding myself, as I've said, in an accidental series.

In light of the fascinating story of the origin and evolution of our universe, how can we speak of God? On Trinity Sunday I confessed my surprise at finding myself imaging God in the threeness of the Trinity symbol:

God is a Mystery beyond our comprehension, yet present to the Cosmos, which flows out of that infinite well of creativity as Energy, Matter, Time, and Space. All that is given existence by the Breath or Spirit of God.

I borrowed an analogy from St. Augustine who imaged God as an infinite ocean, limitless, beyond knowing, and this whole universe, the whole creation as a

sponge submerged in that infinite ocean. The sponge has limits, is finite, though vast and there is not a molecule or atom of the sponge that is not saturated with the ocean's watery reality. So, argues Augustine, God is infinite, beyond knowing - more than the whole of Reality, yet present totally to, in and with the cosmos, giving it existence and life.

Interestingly, that image from the Fourth Century vividly expresses our best sense of the relationship of God to the cosmos - more than (Transcendent); God is more than the creation, yet present in (Immanent); God is intimately present in all that is.

We have then gone on to claim that the nature of the Mystery, the Mystery's meaning, intention, and purpose is defined in a Face - Jesus is the human face of God; in his face we see the light of the knowledge of God; God gains definition as the Word becomes flesh.

From Jesus' life and teaching we discover that devotion to God is the doing of compassion - creating a humane community, where justice is done, compassion is practiced, the hungry are fed, the oppressed set free, the homeless given shelter. That is the end of religion, the purpose for joining in a faith community. In that community we worship, being lifted beyond ourselves through liturgy, symbol, music and artistic expression, recite the story, nurture, and join in the action of compassion, following the way of Jesus.

Can we do that honestly, with authenticity in light of what we have learned of this awesome cosmic drama of which we are a part and the experience of God in the biblical faith tradition, as well as that attested to in other religious traditions?

I do believe we can. Not only do I believe we can re-imagine God in light of all we know and experience of our world, but I believe the wonder of that Mystery is more than our forbears could have dreamed of.

Let me suggest an image of God and God's relation to the cosmos and to humankind that I find fascinating and profound. I take it from the British Biologist/Theologian, Arthur Peacocke, whom I quote in the back pages of your liturgy from his *Theology for a Scientific Age*. The image of God is that of a composer, indeed, of a jazz improviser.

The chapter title where this image appears is "God's Interaction With the World," and the subsection is "Models of God's Activity as Creator." Peacocke points out two classic ways of speaking of the activity of divine creation - the model of "making," and the model of "emanation."

The *maker* model speaks of God as the craftsman, the mechanic. This is the most common biblical manner of speaking. However, the *emanation* model also finds expression - God from God's own being goes out to be actively involved in giving and sustaining the being of all that is.

The "Maker" model lends itself to the idea of God's transcendence - God beyond the world. The "Emanation" model points to God's immanence in Creation - God's presence in and with all that exists.

In light of our knowledge of cosmic reality from the sciences and our reflection on God in the biblical tradition, Peacocke suggests *the model of artistic creation as best imaging God's creative action and interaction with the world*. It is in such a context that he writes the section that appears in the pages of your liturgy. I find the image of Jazz Improvisor fascinating and exciting - highly illuminating of the manner in which God might interact with the cosmic reality.

I am woefully lacking in knowledge of music, music theory, tonality and all related matters. But I can follow Arthur Peacocke's argument - that the composer forms "cosmos" out of "chaos." I can create chaos on a keyboard; the result is noise. The artist uses the same instrument to create music, melody, harmony. And I can also sense that the execution of a musical score unfolds - the immediate moment following on what has preceded and flowing into what follows.

It also makes sense to me that both chance and necessity are operative in a jazz improvisation. I spoke with the master of improvisation last Sunday - Ken Medema. I told him what I was going to attempt to do today. I said to him, "You are all over the keyboard with creative freedom; yet you know some things will work and some will not." He agreed. And I said further, "You are not sure just where you will end up nor how you will get there." Again, he agreed.

That is the fascination of improvisation - the future is full of surprise; yet there are certain limits, parameters within which the creative artist must work.

It also makes sense to me that creation is endowed with infinite potentiality which might be actualized in this manner or in that. I can see then that, if on the scene of an evolutionary unfolding of billions of years there emerges a creature like humankind with self-consciousness, awareness, being the vehicle of spirit, such a creature plays a very real role in the future of cosmic development. If the Creator took the risk of creating a creature in the image and likeness of the Creator, self-conscious, creative, free, then a whole new dimension has emerged in the cosmic drama. Now there is a whole multitude of composers determining scores of infinite variety raising the complexity of the whole to unimaginable heights.

It makes sense to me, further, that the emergence of creatures of consciousness, able to become observers of the cosmic symphony and players in that symphony, would be the intention of the Creator Who delights in the cosmic play and delights in the delight of those who come to share that delight, to wonder, to stand in awe of it all.

And then I love the manner in which God as Jazz Improvisor illumines the idea of the Creator's transcendence over the cosmos, but is at the same time immanent

in its unfolding as the composer is in her music, so that in the playing of the score musicians are experiencing the very being of the composer. So, to be engaged in creative living in this cosmic drama is to know in intimate communion the Creator Whose Spirit gives life to all.

The human creature, self-conscious, aware, attentive becomes the discernor of God's amazing creative work in its infinite variety and depth and also the actualizer of God's intention and purpose. And that actualization follows no rigid, ironclad form. Actualization will take place in a great variety of ways through the multiplicity of possible configurations.

That is to say - now the creature becomes herself a jazz improvisor, bringing new patterns and forms to expression out of the infinite potentiality with which the Creator has endowed the cosmos.

That points to the incredible responsibility and exhilarating challenge of being "co-creators" with God. In awe before the Mystery, creative fount of all that is, in adoration before the wonder of grace as revealed in the face of Jesus, in openness to the enlivening Spirit that breathes through our being, we worship full of wonder.

The ancient Hebrew poet captured, beyond what he could have known, the paradox -

*O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
The moon and the stars that you have established,
What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crown them with glory and honor.*

In a cosmic symphony of such dimension, who are we - fragile, vulnerable, indeed, small. Yet it is we who have become conscious, aware, who are able to wonder, to worship and, with the Mystery Creator at the center, become co-creators moving the musical score toward humane community, spirituality, and compassion, actualizing the Eternal Purpose of God for cosmic harmony - a Divine Oratorio whose theme is "God loves you; all will be well!"

References:

John Knox. *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ: A Study of Pattern in Christology*. Cambridge University Press, 1967.

Arthur Peacocke. *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming – Natural, Divine and Human*. Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1993.