

Come Alive -- Trinity B

Today we celebrate as Trinity Sunday, and, for many of us it involves taking a big risk, story-wise. Our readings help us deal with this by portraying some of the most powerful and imaginative metaphors the human mind has ever conceived: six-winged seraphs, debtors to the flesh, born from above. They have been employed in an effort to describe the power and perfection of God. The Trinity is, at its basic level an example of this too. We follow what is called monotheism, which means one God, but the moment that declaration is out of our mouths, we start talking about God as three-in-one; one-in-three.

I'm reminded of the story of when Jesus saved the woman caught in adultery from the townspeople who were about to stone her. We are sometimes told that Jesus is the only person who has lived without sin. So there he is, with everyone gathered around holding big rocks over their heads about to fling them upon the woman and he says, "Stop! Whoever is without sin, let them cast the first stone." You all know this story. So, one by one they drop their stones to the ground and slink sheepishly away into the countryside, realizing they all sin too. All of them, that is, except one woman, who stays, with a great big stone over her head, about to bring it down in righteous anger and ruin his object lesson. Jesus looks at her with a pained expression and says, "Aww, come on, Mom!"

This is not to be flippant about the sinlessness of the Blessed Virgin Mary, but to point out that we have trouble defining God. We can't seem to do it directly; we tell stories and think up metaphors that help us communicate with one another about what God means to our lives: God is the spirit of our lives, the source of our being. Like life itself, God is our greatest joy and our greatest fear. God both creates and judges. Life both begins and ends. It's impossible to describe directly; we gotta go through the door of metaphor.

So the scriptures today contain a number of these amazing metaphors. The hem of God's robe fills the entire temple, with angels surrounding God's presence, each one with six wings. God's power to make us new is so miraculous that we can have our mouths touched by a live coal and be, not burned but healed. And if we don't understand what God wants, we will be destroyed, and by the way, fewer than a tenth of us will understand. Pretty tough stuff.

The psalmist is a little more pastoral. Now we're talking about God's voice, and it doesn't kill people, just trees, cracking them and stripping their bark and blowing so hard it makes entire geographical areas skip "like a young calf." For those not experienced with livestock, this may seem ridiculous, but it's not, cattle do indeed skip, it's just a strong metaphor, a special effect, like in a disaster movie

This voice of God takes on a human personality in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, and the metaphor merges with reality. An actual man becomes a metaphor and vice versa. The story becomes a reality, and then turns back into a story, it's a story that we tell each other over and over and which never loses its power: For God so loved the World that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

According to this story line, life and God are no longer by turns fearsome and fascinating, they are both clearly good and joyful. But only, as St. Paul insists, in a spiritual frame of reference. If we insist on staying literal, we will always remain limited (and miserable). But if we become spiritual, (metaphorical really) anything and everything is possible. We all know we all die. But if death does not get the final say, then joy can push out our fear and we become able to love freely; we can be "all in," as the poker players say in the movies, but without risk. We're working for the house.

One reason it's hard to be a spiritual person is that although every deep truth about God is best expressed metaphorically, every deep metaphor is not about God. That's why the first commandment is the first commandment. If you've seen even one episode of Mad Men on television, you know what I mean. The story takes us back to a time when companies selling products discovered just how powerful deep metaphors can be in getting people to buy things, whether they can afford them (financially or nutritionally) or not. The sixties and seventies were filled with strangely captivating advertisements that had us sentimental and happy and excited without knowing why. Why is because they were bursting with barely concealed imitations of God metaphors.

Take one of the most amazing examples: the selling of sodapop – soft drink is the euphemism, that almost nobody in America goes without. In 1963 we were extolled to “Come alive, come alive...you're in the Pepsi Generation.” In other words, we can be part of that less than a tenth who survive Isaiah's prophesied death and destruction, part of the new generation, simply by drinking Pepsi!

By 1971, the World's most successful beverage company by far was claiming the same goals and abilities as God's very self:

(sing) I'd like to buy the world a home
And furnish it with love
Grow apple trees and honey bees
And snow white turtle doves.

I'd like to teach the world to sing
In perfect harmony
I'd like to buy the world...a Coke
And keep it company
That's the real thing.

What the world wants today
Is the real thing. Now that's chutzpah.

And in 1974, we have what rivals John's Gospel for paradoxical wonder and theological complexity:

(sing) It's the nothing that makes us something; it's what we miss that hits the mark. It's what left out that leaves us in; it's the light shining over the dark. Un for all; all for Un. 7up, the Uncola.

This is not evil, but it is pretty tricky. They had to get tricky with words, because fooling around with chemicals was increasingly frowned upon. We all know they took the cocaine out of Coca Cola way back in 1909. What I didn't know, until I started looking things up for today, is that they didn't take the Lithium out of 7up until 1950!

Just as we must pay attention to what we drink and eat, we must pay the closest attention to the stories we hear, to be aware of how they are working on us. And we must mind, ever so carefully the metaphors we ourselves use. Because, as we talked about last week with the thousand tongues, each of us encounters God differently, and the whole Bible is a chronicle of our attempts to convey those encounters with vivid and resonant metaphors. There I go again, vivid is a sight metaphor and resonant is one for hearing. Keep trying, keep exploring, keep telling, keep listening. One woman's God is another man's Dr. Pepper, and nobody ever gets it just right. Life really is much more fun when you're refreshed, but what refreshes YOU best?