

HOLY TRINITY SUNDAY
JUNE 7, 2009
“WIND-BORN(E)”

Let us pray using the words of Brian Wren,
the prolific British hymn writer, one of
whose expansively trinitarian hymns, “God,
the All-Holy” is one of many of his not to
make it into our ELW :

*God the All-Holy, Maker and Mother,
Gladly we gather, bringing in prayer
Old hurts for healing, new hopes for holding,
Giving, receiving loving and care.*

*Spirit, All-seeing, knitting and blending
Joy in desiring, friendship and ease,
Make our belonging loyal and lasting,
So that our pledging freshens and frees.*

*Christ, All-Completing, Nature enfolding,
Evil exhausting in love’s embrace,
Weaving and mending, make every ending
God’s new beginning glowing with grace.*

In the name of the Triune God I pray. Amen.

The word “metaphor,” my Webster’s tells me, formed from two Greek words “*meta*” meaning “over” and “*pherein*” meaning “to carry,” is a “figure of speech in which one thing is likened to another, different thing by being spoken of as if it were that other—as in Shakespeare’s “all the world’s a stage.” Or as Nelson Goodman, a real symbologist unlike Dan Brown’s fictional Robert Langdon, played by Tom Hanks, has put it with a little more verve, metaphor is “teaching an old word new tricks,” or it is “a calculated category mistake,” or maybe best of all—at least for wannabe English majors—his tongue-in-cheek definition of a metaphor as “an affair between a predicate with a past and an object that yields while protesting.” In other words, as the theologian Colin Gunton has put it helpfully, “the common feature that makes a metaphor a

metaphor is that words come to be used in a new or unusual way in human speech.”

My good old German friend from our students days together in Edinburgh, Ingolf Dalferth, who teaches at both Zurich and Claremont and who has worshipped here with us—and who writes about such things as metaphors—has described how, in one of his books, the use of a fresh metaphor often precedes the making of new scientific discoveries. I once heard a world famous computer scientist, an expert in artificial intelligence by the name of John Holland—whom I also once heard interviewed on Bill Moyers’ tv show—in a lecture at the U. of Michigan describe how he was busy studying poetry—this an electrical engineer computer genius-- in order to get a better sense of how metaphors and other uses of images influence our ability to learn and know and express ourselves.

Maybe you noticed how we find Jesus in today’s Gospel reading using metaphorical

language in what we can sense was a difficult time he was having getting a Pharisee to understand his preaching regarding the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. Notice how St. John carefully describes this “Nick at Night” episode, as I like to call it, as an encounter initiated by what seems to have been a Pharisee, a “leader of the Jews,” John calls him, who was genuinely curious about Jesus’ teaching regarding the in-breaking of the reign of God. But Nick seems to have been a very cautious fellow, for as John says, “*he came to Jesus by night,*” under cover of darkness—we can suppose for fear of letting his interest in Jesus be known publicly—as Jesus is elsewhere confronted by Pharisees in quite critical cross-examination.

But notice Nick at Nite’s ingratiating opening words: “*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.*” Nick here seems right on the edge of faith, doesn’t he—just about

ready to fall into the kingdom. But then Jesus spoils it all by proclaiming a truth of the kingdom metaphorically. Instead of just straight out saying, “Follow me” as he did to the 12—or “make a decision to let me be your personal Lord and Savior,” as our so-called evangelical sisters and brothers might put it—Jesus responds to Nick at Nite’s seeming readiness to become his follower by pronouncing rather cryptically, *“Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above—“above”* being a word in Greek that can also be translated “again” or “anew”—being “born again,” as again our evangelical brothers and sisters put it.

But Nick—the good Bible-thumping Pharisee that he is—doesn’t get it. And so he asks as has been trained for clarification. *“How can anyone be born after having grown old? A good enough question if one is taking Jesus’ words literally. As we see when Nick asks a second question: “Can one*

enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" A question to which all mothers present will quickly answer "I sure hope not!" One birth per child is plenty, thanks.

And so Jesus—and I know see a little grin lifting the corner of his mouth—answers Nick's heartfelt question, his quest for a literal answer to what he assumed was a simple and direct enough question. But Jesus answers Nick by altering and thickening the metaphor—not abandoning it. "*Very truly,*" Jesus says, literally in Greek, "amen, amen"—underlining the utter truthfulness—something a bit deeper than the Colbert Reports "truthiness"-- of what's he's about to say—"*Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit*—what we could also translate, remembering last week's readings for Pentecost, as "wind" or "breath." "*What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.* Jesus is using virtually

all of these words in a metaphorical, imaginative sense. Take just the word “kingdom,” for example as in “kingdom of God.” Now literally speaking God has no kingdom in the sense that Herod has a kingdom or Cyrus of Persia had a kingdom—that is a geographical territory over which he God exercises absolute rule. Jesus uses the word “kingdom” metaphorically, in an effort to help us stretch beyond our experience of this world to find language that can help us grasp what it might mean for God to “rule” and “reign” in a non-geographic, indeed “spiritual” sense “invisible” to our normal senses. You see the difficulty—and why the literally-minded Nick at Nite has such a hard time following—the good Pharisee whose religion was a very down-to-earth code of religious dos and don’ts, laying it all out like a law book.

But Jesus challenges Nick’s imagination even further by thickening his metaphorical

language. “*Do not be astonished*” — maybe “perplexed” or “confused” would be a better translation— “*that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind*—the word in Greek also means “breath” and “spirit”—*blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit*—which, again, also can mean “breath” or “wind.”

Well, Jesus now really has Nick’s head spinning so that all he can ask is “*How can these things be?*” which I always hear as Luther’s famous repeated question in the Small Catechism said by some to mimic the incessant “Was ist das?” of one of his persistent children: “What does this mean?” To which Jesus finally has had enough of Nick’s wooden literalism and thick-headedness and responds in picque: “*Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly*—in all truthiness—*I tell you, we speak of what we*

know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony—again, twice that word “martyr” — witness — that we encountered a couple of Sundays ago. “If I told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?”

And then, as you heard read, Jesus reminds Nick of that famous OT story of Moses lifting up the snake on a stick upon which the people who’d been bitten by snakes only needed to look upon to be healed—and so it is, again using a story to make his point, with the Son of Man—meaning himself—who must be lifted up—meaning “lifted up on a stick of another sort called a “cross.”” And then follow those beloved words of John 3:16—that again, our evangelical friends use as a literal club compelling folks to believe or else: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”*

And then John 3:17 which never makes it onto a placard in any end zone: *“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”* Which is indeed the **“Gospel of the Lord!”**

It’s not, friends, that we’re saved by metaphor or by some fancy and sophisticated understanding of the nature of language. But as Jesus himself so clearly shows us in his own use of imaginative language including his telling of parables, the good news of God, precisely because it is God’s good news and not our own, is not able to be communicated in wooden, literalistic language, which ought to be clear to anyone remotely familiar with the Bible and the truth of God it communicates to us—by the power of the Spirit.

And so too we need to emphasize on this day that we celebrate as Holy Trinity Sunday. It’s not that God is literally some kind of mathematical formula with a base of

three—that somehow allows us to define and comprehend God once and for all. But “Trinitarian” language—particularly that which we use in our worship and hymnody—is evocative, imaginative, poetic language that simply if mysteriously is satisfied to “imagine” God—as in Isaiah’s vision of which the choir sang—doing our best to describe our experience of God’s complete otherness which at the same time we—and the faithful before us—have experienced and described as “an otherness for us”—that took human form once and for all in the person of a very particular first century Jew in whose life, death and resurrection we claim to have encountered God godself—as well as our true humanity—all of which we experience in the here and now of historical existence in the community of the church, empowered by a wind of God that is Jesus’ continuing presence among us for the sake of the world as long as it takes God to bring to completion

God's intentions for creation. We—the church—this congregation, our synod, our ELCA, and all anywhere who call Jesus Lord, are God's agents in proclaiming and enacting the Gospel as the Spirit gives us power—a Spirit, remember, which blows where it chooses—sometimes in our faces, sometimes at our backs, but never under our control. And that's good news.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always. Amen.