

FEBRUARY 1, 2009
EPIPHANY 4
“AUTHOR-ITY”

Let us pray: Gracious God, Author of life, we give you thanks for poets and prophets, for those who use your gift of creativity and imagination to craft words with care and precision and vitality that convey to us truth, truth rooted in your own creative Word. It is in the name of your Word made flesh, Jesus the Christ, that I pray. Amen.

“Hallelujah! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation. Great are your works, O Lord, pondered by all who delight in them,” begin the words of today’s psalmody from the 111th Psalm. And in a sense today’s sermon is an extended paean of praise and thanksgiving to God for those among us often overlooked who have answered God’s call—whether or not they know or acknowledge it as **God’s**

calling—to be crafters of words, wordsmiths, writers, what St. Paul in one place calls in a literal translation of the Greek, “poets of the truth.”

We’re gifted beyond measure to have one such “poet of the truth” in our midst here in the person of Tom Jacobson, a God-gifted playwright whose genius is to imagine and then create plots and characters and dialogue and dramatic action that tell us the truth about life, about ourselves, and about God—using words to spin for us stories that speak truth to power, as we find Jesus doing in today’s Gospel reading—teaching with an authority that astounded the crowds and that was sufficiently powerful (another meaning of the Greek word we translate as “authority”) that his very say-so was able to expel an “unclean spirit” from a troubled—perhaps schizophrenic or paranoid—man who confronted him one day in the synagogue. Funny, isn’t it, how our places of worship often seem to draw such

“troubled” folks. I guess that’s why we call them “sanctuaries.”

This is one of those stories in Mark’s Gospel in which it is the “unclean spirits” or “demon-possessed” whom Jesus confronts and exorcizes who alone seem to know who Jesus really is—while the crowds and his own disciples seem not all that sure. But they do recognize a “new teaching” when they hear it and are “amazed,” Mark tells us, by the “authority” Jesus seems to wield—a word that in English, of course—and this is my point—derives from the word “author”—hence “author-ity” as in my sermon title. Real “authority” is the originating power that is a “charism” or “gift” that flows from God and that “speaks truth”—that carries a kind of authenticity and trustworthiness and truthfulness. It is one of those “great works” of God that “*are pondered by all who delight in them*” as our psalmist put it. Both verbs are important, for “poets of the truth” both inspire in us

reflection and **joy**—lead us to “ponder” and then “delight.”

I wrote in my article for this month’s newsletter that I was very much looking forward to the Bishop’s Colloquy I just returned from because one of the scheduled speakers was Kathleen Norris a well known writer and poet, best known for her book Dakota: A Spiritual Geography and Cloister Walk, a book inspired by her time at St. John’s Abbey and University in Minnesota where she had been a resident fellow at its Ecumenical Institute a few years after Ruth and I had lived there. It was good for us pastors to hear from a poet during our time apart, to have her read for us some of her poems as well as those of other poets—to help us to savor the words and images and metaphors--and the truths evoked by them.

For we pastors too are called to take care with words, and how our words, by the power of the Spirit, evoke God’s Word and God’s truth just as Moses recounts in our

Hebrew Scripture reading the difficult nature of his calling to be a prophet—a Word-bearer—of God. “*I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet,*” Yahweh who had first called out to Moses from the burning bush on Sinai, reminded him, “*who shall speak to them everything that I command.*” Further, and ominously, Yahweh goes on to warn: “*Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the names of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.*” That’s enough to send chills up and down the spine of us preacher-types, I’ll tell you. For, of course, the “authority” with which we proclaim the Word of God is not our own authority, is not any kind of power originating from our own learning or experience or creativity or piety, but solely from God by means of

God's Word—God's on-going act of self-communication working through us as God's instruments.

There's a framed hanging in the sacristy where I vest before each service that few of you, I expect, have ever seen. In rather quaint and old-fashioned language it is a prayer addressed to God, but like many prayers is really directed at the pray-er, the one praying, rather than God the prayee. It goes: *“Lord God, Thou hast made me a pastor and teacher in the Church. Thou seest how unfit I am to administer rightly this great and responsible Office; and had I been without Thy aid and counsel I would surely have ruined it all long ago. Therefore do I invoke Thee. How gladly do I desire to yield and consecrate my heart and mouth to this ministry! I desire to teach the congregation. I too desire ever to learn and to keep Thy Word my constant companion and to meditate thereupon earnestly. Use me as Thy instrument in Thy service. Only*

do not forsake me, for if I am left to myself, I will certainly bring it all to destruction.
Amen.

Now I confess that I don't pray this prayer religiously each Sunday before donning my alb, but it certainly is true that I—like most pastors I know—am well aware of how dangerous preaching is—taking on oneself the high calling of uttering what Luther called the “living voice” of the Gospel—assuming the role of the speaker of the Word of God into the life of our contemporary world and a particular community of believers. Of course those of us who speak from pulpits aren't alone in this awesome responsibility—a calling that we are all ordained in the waters of baptism to bear in our everyday lives. But today I do want to emphasize the particularly high calling of writers and poets who, like the prophets of old, are called by God to craft words to express the truth of our human condition—and especially those who do so

in the service of truth-telling that recognizes that God is the source of all truth—even if not in any final sense any of our religious traditions in and of themselves.

And that's why today, having spent a few days in the presence of a truth-telling poet, Kathleen Norris, who was particularly eloquent in pointing to the liturgy of the church and its scriptures—and centrally the Psalms—as the church's own vast treasury of truth-telling poetry, I would like to close today by paying tribute to one such truth-telling American writer and poet who happened to have been baptized and confirmed and raised as a Lutheran whose death we learned of during our gathering, John Updike—the author of some 50, if you can imagine that. Updike, I'll confess, has for some 40 years now been my favorite American author, in part I'm sure because of his sensitivity to and eccentric reflections, however indirect, on matters religious and spiritual including church-going itself.

Yet I've always liked Updike because he wasn't at all conventionally religious, and in fact any of you who have been readers of Updike know he was a master of writing sexually explicit scenes—nearly always from a very male point of view. While this is off-putting to many, I've always taken it as a sign of the “incarnational” character of his writing—which nearly always was very mundane and true-to-life, rooted in the earthiness of our existence as human beings. One critic once even went so far as to say that Updike as a heterosexual male writer tended to confuse the allure and magic of female sexual organs with the burning bush. (He put it in saltier language than that, of course.) And some judge Updike as one of our best stylists and crafter of words who ought to have spent his genius on larger themes and more ambitious literary projects.

I myself think that Updike's best writing is to be found in his short stories rather than his novels or poetry or critical essays—and

I've long used a couple of them in faith and fiction classes I've led over the years, like "Short Easter" or my very favorite "Made in Heaven." But let a couple of his poems serve as examples, a very early one that I used some years ago for our Easter Vigil service entitled "Seven Stanzas at Easter." It's a pretty polemical poem arguing for the utter reality of Jesus' resurrection. See what you think:

*Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body.
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse,
the molecules reknit,
the amino acids rekindle,
the church will fall.*

*It was not as the flowers,
each soft spring recurrent;
it was not as His Spirit in the mouths
and fuddled eyes of the eleven apostles;
it was as his flesh: ours.*

*The same hinged thumbs and toes,
the same valved heart
That—pierced—died, withered, paused, and
then regathered out of enduring Might
new strength to enclose.*

And then this stanza in which he, the poet, the master of metaphor, repudiates all efforts to relegate the resurrection of Jesus to a matter of “mere” imagery:

*Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence,
making of the event a parable, a sign
painted in the faded credulity of earlier
ages:
let us walk through the door.*

*The stone rolled back, not papier-
maiche,
not a stone in a story,
but the vast rock of materiality that in
the slow grinding of*

*time will eclipse for each of us
the wide light of day.*

And then this verse with its sly reference
to modern science and quantum theory:

*And if we will have an angel at the tomb,
make it a real angel,
weighty with Max Planck's quanta,
vivid with hair, opaque in the dawn light,
robed in real linen
spun on a definite loom.*

*Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
for our own convenience, our own sense of
beauty,
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour,
we are embarrassed by the miracle,
and crushed by remonstrance.*

John Updike wasn't a fundamentalist
who believed in the literal truth of every
word of scripture. But in the early fifties, or
whenever he wrote this early poem, he must
have felt that the resurrection of the body

was becoming something less than God intended it to be understood as—something perhaps “spiritual” but not sufficiently “fleshy” and “earthy.” And so his “Seven Stanzas on Easter” become the poet’s defense of the utter reality of Easter.

In Friday’s LA Times appeared this timely little snippet containing a three-stanza poem written by Updike which will be published in a forthcoming collection entitled “Endpoint” in September. It’s title is fittingly “Requiem” and to me seems to represent Updike’s “realism” contemplating his own death in typically light-hearted fashion (his best poetry is what he called “light verse” after all):

*It came to me the other day:
Were I to die, no one would say,
‘Oh, what a shame!
So young, so full
Of promise—depths unplumbable!’*

Instead, a shrug and tearless eyes

*Will greet my overdue demise;
The wide response will be, I know,
'I thought he died a while ago.'*

*For life's a shabby subterfuge,
And death is real, and dark, and huge.
The shock of it will register
Nowhere but where it will occur.*

For once Updike was wrong, regardless of his humility. For as we sang at one of our services during the Bishop's Colloquy:

*"There is no place where earth's sorrows
are more felt than up in heav'n.
There is no place where earth's failings
Have such kindly judgment giv'n.*

*For the love of God is broader
than the measures of our mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.
But we make this love too narrow
by false limits of our own;*

*and we magnify its strictness
with a zeal God will not own.*

Requiem in pacem, brother John, and rest in
peace all poets of God's Word.

The peace that passes understanding keep
our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.