

Genesis 1:1-2

Psalm 91: 1-2, 4; 5a, 9-10a, 11; 14-15 *R: You are our shelter and our strength.*

Jude 1:20-25

Matthew 14:22-33

Inchworms and Walking on Water **August 24, 2008 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time**

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Over the years, my high school friend Carol Jessen, has become a well known water color artist, traveling each summer from St. Louis to Booth Bay Harbor, Maine, to paint, teach and exhibit.

Recently she wrote about the difference between the scientific approach to reality and the artist's approach to reality. She described sitting down to a delicious, colorful salad at her Maine home and spying a tiny inchworm crawling out of the garden flowers placed in a vase on the table. She watched him [or her] for a half an hour as the inch worm sensed its way around the vase. As she watched, she remembered a song about an inchworm that she learned in elementary school:

*"Inch worm, inch worm, measuring the marigolds,
seems to me you'd stop and see, how beautiful they are."*

That got her thinking about the difference between the scientist and the artist, between seeking truth through science and seeking truth through beauty. She commented, "Both are valid".

Only an artist, or a biologist, would spend so much time watching an inch worm inch. Both can describe what they observe, but the scientist does so in technical scientific language; artist does so in the language of color, perspective, paint. If the artist is a writer, the artist paints pictures with words. Each renders the truth that she "sees".

Last week I visited the Getty Center where I experienced the painting of Maria Sibylla Merian. In the late 1600s and early 1700s, this Swiss/German woman became a naturalist and scientific illustrator of insects, reptiles and plants for scientific books. She was the first to document the metamorphosis of the butterfly at a time when scientists believed in the spontaneous generation of insects from rotting mud

which theologians claimed the work of the devil. She spent her youth investigating insects, starting with worms, silk worms! Silk worms led to other caterpillars and her realization that many worms produce beautiful butterflies or moths.¹

Merian also used her artistic skills not only for scientific drawings but also to paint plants, insects and reptiles. Her eye for color, her appreciation of “bugs and snakes” [so unladylike in the 17th century], produced delicate, memorable renderings of insects and butterflies. Like my friend Carol, Maria Merian was a woman who spent time observing some of our planet’s tiniest creatures. She captured their truth in languages of science and art.

What does this have to do with today’s readings? It illustrates how differently we can approach them. We can subject ancient, non-scientific writings to scientific analysis, find them “untrue” because they are inconsistent with current scientific knowledge. Or we can allow them to be what they were in the ancient worlds that produced them, literary art creating visual and auditory images in which religious “truths” are revealed.

In the Genesis reading, we hear that, in the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness was over the deep, while a divine wind, God’s feminine spirit, breath, swept over the waters. As contemporary people, we know that creation – as event – didn’t happen that way. We can reject Genesis as scientifically untrue and, therefore, useless.

We can reject Jude’s description of life in faith community – of compassion and mercy – because sociology and anthropology tell us communities don’t operate that way. It’s inconsistent with modern science’s understanding and witness of community; therefore, it’s worthless.

The gospel reading describes Jesus coming to the disciples in the early morning hours, in total darkness, walking on the sea. It describes Peter’s challenge to Jesus: “If it’s you, command me to come to you on the water”. It describes Peter’s fear and Jesus’ rescue of Peter from the darkness and deep when he begins to sink. The empirical thinker will say this couldn’t have happened; therefore, it didn’t happen. The story is meaningless.

So why do we read these ancient writings, some almost 3000 years old? Why bother to remain connected to our ancestors in faith

when their faith was, from a scientific perspective, built on “false” assumptions?

Ancient peoples could not foresee the industrial, scientific or computer revolutions. They didn’t imagine that their writings would be read 2-3000 years later. They wrote about religious experience, not ancient – or future - science. They wrote for the people of *their* times, to explore the meaning of *their* experiences. Because scientific knowledge was so limited, they used literary arts to capture and express their truths. They understood, by default, that truth is not limited to scientific understanding of reality, and that communication about religious experience is best captured in literary language, the language of symbols, images and metaphors.

Thus Biblical readings **can** connect us to the meaning and truths our spiritual ancestors experienced if we let them be what they are. In Genesis 1.1, the images convey the presence of creative Spirit from the beginning of all life, its inherent presence in all life, and the human experience that creation comes from “the deep”, that chaos precedes creation.

The sheer beauty of the words of the ancient writer we call Jude captures the mystery of human faith communities: The foundation of faith, prayer in the Spirit, love inherent in creative Spirit, the new direction that comes with the experience of the Spirit manifest in Jesus. Like Nancy’s words when she preaches, the sheer beauty of these words uplifts.

The gospel story is multi-dimensional. One dimension conveys aspects of human nature in religious experience. When religious experience manifests in a way Peter deems “impossible”, the experience becomes “all about him”. He challenges Jesus to prove his, Peter’s, experience real. Peter creates the terms of the test. Because of fear, Peter fails his own test, sinking like the rock after which he is named into the deep and the chaos. The Spirit - through Jesus - keeps him afloat despite his “little” faith. The story dramatizes the angst which occurs when new religious experience emerges from old. The Spirit, manifest in Jesus, helps carry this rock to new terrain, creating new life out of chaos. As Moses led his people through the waters to life without slavery, Jesus leads his people to a different sort of life without slavery, to radical inclusivity.

The magisterium, the Vatican, missed the many meanings in this story of Peter: The dangers of egotism, of subjecting the Spirit to

human tests, of fear, of “little” faith. They stake their authority on apostolic succession from this sinking rock. Their faith in the Spirit is so “little” that they believe God’s revelation, and the human understanding of it, can’t change. They dedicate themselves to preserving “truth” as they understand truth, declaring excommunicated any who understands it differently. They are doctrinal literalists. Unwittingly, they trap themselves in a version of scientific empiricism: Scripture is God’s word; therefore Scripture is “true”; the story of Peter is in Scripture; therefore it happened as written.

We have a choice. We can eschew the writings of our ancestors in faith because some of what they described never happened; or, we can eschew our often unconscious requirement that ancient writers live up to our scientific standards. We can be like the inch worm on the marigold or vase, missing the marigold for the petals and leaves, missing the vase because the terrain is so foreign. Or we can acknowledge different paths to truth, recognize the insusceptibility of religious experience to scientific analysis, and seek ancient truths in the literary art.

The path to a new way of thinking, living, and being can be a hard one. We risk being swallowed up by chaos, instead of carried by hovering, creative Spirit. The new cosmology challenges us to use what science currently knows, evidence of the vast immensity of creation, the enormity of time entailed in creation, the newness of humans in the history of creation, to reinterpret religious experience. All of this is good. What perhaps is misguided is the argument some proponents of new cosmology make, that we must make the language of religious experience literally consistent with current scientific theory about the universe. Scientific language is scientific language. It does what it does very well. But if we make the language of science into the language of religious experience, we narrow immensely our capacity to perceive and experience the Spirit which is Life. We become like inchworms on marigolds, unable to see the marigolds for the petals and the leaves.

ⁱ Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia. Maria Sibylla Merian. Biography.