

## *The Message*

by Rev. Joe Connolly

“Jesus answered, ‘I have told you, I did tell you, but you do not believe.’” — John 10:25a.

It’s likely you have all heard of the so called “man in the moon.” And in fact if, on the evening of a full moon, you squint your eyes a bit and tilt your head slightly while staring at the moon you can somewhat make out an image that presents itself in a number of ways, one or several of which can be seen as a bit like a human face.

Indeed, there’s a common perception, largely both Northern and Western, of a face on the surface of the moon with eyes, a nose and an open mouth. This particular human face can be seen in the North but can also be seen in tropical regions on both sides of the equator. However, seeing a face in the moon becomes somewhat more problematic and is observed less frequently— eventually not at all— as one moves towards the South Pole.

Given that, have you ever heard about the “rabbit in the moon?” There is a tradition, more prevalent in the East and in the Southern hemisphere than in the West and North, that the image available to the human psyche is a rabbit.

The idea of a rabbit image exists in many cultures but is certainly more prevalent in East Asian folklore and, interestingly since particular place this is in the West, in Aztec mythology. The point of noting that this rabbit is seen in those locations is to insist this image is not exclusively Eastern or Southern, just as the so called “man in the moon” is not exclusively Northern or Western. Hence, there must be some cultural influence in play.

On top of that, there are still other cultures which identify a monkey or an otter or a jackal when they look toward the full moon but nothing else— no man, no rabbit. One obvious question arises from all of this: are we humans looking at the same thing in the sky? If we are looking at the same thing, why are we not seeing the same thing?

I do need to note the obvious. There are many studies which tell us our brain supplies a complete image where only a sketchy semblance of an outline exists.

So are these images simply our imagination at work? Or are there other factors? Certainly, from what I just indicated, the culture in which we live might be influential when it comes to what we see but many other things do seem to enter into the mix. (Slight pause.)

Let me move in a different direction for a moment with what I think of as an interesting question. What is a poem? Is it possible a poem is a strange thing which operates as nothing else in the world operates? After all, a poem is not like instructive writing, like directions on how to build a cabinet. Nor is a poem narrative writing. Only rarely does a poem tell a story in a linear way and when a poem does tell a story, it probably finds unique ways of transmitting it.

So, what is a poem and, additionally, what is the function of poetry? Is a poem “a painting in words?” Is a poem “a medium in which self-expression happens?” Is a poem “a song that sometimes rhymes and can illustrate beauty?”

Or is a poem all of these and, at the very same time, none of these? Are all these good descriptions of a poem and at one and the same time totally inadequate? ]1] (Slight pause.)

We find these words in the work known as the Gospel According to the School of John: “Jesus answered, ‘I

have told you, I did tell you, but you do not believe.” (Slight pause.)

In this passage Jesus is simply answering a question. And the reply offered by Jesus reminds us that an understanding of who this Rabbi is cannot be reduced to a matter of deciding whether Jesus measures up to some preconceived notion of either how a Messiah ought to act or even how a divine figure ought to act.

Jesus eludes prior categories and also totally redefines cherished titles drawn from Israel’s past. Those titles include, for example, Messiah, Chosen One, Anointed, Begotten of God. While being labeled with such titles, Jesus seems to transcend and thereby transform them all.

And yes, if you have not noticed, there is a problem with the very question being asked by the religious authorities. As a reminder, this is the question: “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are really the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

The question and because of that, those asking the question, seems to assume a decision about the Messiah is merely a matter of processing information. Hence, if Jesus will provide the data, they can arrive at a reasoned conclusion.

The response Jesus offers rejects that kind of logic. “My sheep hear my voice.”

Put differently and in, perhaps, more modern, vernacular terms this an interpretation of what Jesus is saying: “I have been speaking in the language poets use. So I have been speaking in the language consistent with the World of God, the Dominion of God. Have you not been listening?”

“I have been drawing an outline on the face of the moon and that outline reflects the face of God. Can you not see a full picture given the lines I have drawn?” (Slight pause.)

One of the big mistakes— the term I used in my meditations over the last two weeks was heresy but, as I said last week, heresy is probably too harsh a term— one of the big mistakes we make when we read Scripture is we take it to be— largely— narrative, story written in a logical, linear way. Scripture was not then and was never written in the moment, as soon as events happened, like a report in a newspaper. And Scripture was never intended as narrative.

Scripture looks back on what has happened and reflects on it. Scripture is, thereby, like any work of art, not a set of facts but a reflection. More precisely, Scripture is a theological reflection, a meditation about God. Being a reflection, being meditation, makes Scripture, by definition, a work of art.

That Scriptures is a meditation may come as a shock to many, since that image does not conform to our cultural perceptions concerning Scripture. Our cultural bias says Scripture is more a report of what happened than about theology, more a report of what happened than a theological reflection.

But the long and the short of this is theological reflection and theology, itself, is never about narrative. Theology is not about explaining with precision. Theology is about the poetic.

And yes, the definition of theology is the science of the study of God, and that sounds both exact and exacting. But, just like poetry, Biblical theology paints pictures in words. Just like poetry, what Biblical theology offers is self-expression. Just like poetry, Biblical theology strives to display beauty.

Theology is all of these and, at the very same time, none of these. These are all good descriptions of theology

and, at the very same time, totally inadequate. Indeed, what *do you* see on the face of the moon? And are the possibilities of what you can see, your vision, overwhelmed by the culture in which you live? (Slight pause.)

All of that leaves us with a question, perhaps a challenging one. What is our own perception of Jesus? How do we, each of us, see Jesus? What is the message of Jesus?

The challenge presented in that is each one of us has to decide how we see Jesus. Each one of us has to decide how each of us sees the Dominion of God. Each one of us has to decide what the message of Jesus is. And each one of us has to decide how that plays out in our life.

But there is an added challenge. There is what each one of us, sees as individuals. But then the next question to be asked: ‘what does the community of faith, as a whole, see?’

Then there is, perhaps, an even larger issue. Is our individual vision of Jesus *and* our communal vision of Jesus, our individual understanding of the Dominion of God *and* our communal vision of God overwhelmed by the culture in which we live? Does the culture blur our vision, blur our understanding of Jesus, blur our understanding of God? (Slight pause.)

Let me end by reciting the thought for meditation in the bulletin today. It’s an aphorism from Kallistos Ware, a bishop with the Eastern Orthodox Church. (Quote:) “It is not the task of Christianity to provide easy answers for every question. It is the task of Christianity to make us progressively aware of a mystery. God is not so much the object of our knowledge as the cause of our wonder.” Amen.

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United Church of Christ, First Congregational, Norwich, New York

ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “Two things I want to say— I said the Bible is about theology but to be more narrow, the Bible is about the theology of love. Second, when I entered Bangor Seminary Malcom Warford was the President there. This is what he said in a published article: ‘When you don’t believe in God, you believe in every god that comes along, a tame domesticated one with a small ‘g.’ When you trade mystery for security you end up with trivialization.’”

BENEDICTION: Let us go out from this place in the sure knowledge that God is at the center of our lives. Let us go out from this place in the sure knowledge that God’s love abounds. Let us go out from this place and strive to have our deeds bear witness to God’s love. And may the steadfast love of God and the peace of Christ, which surpasses understanding, keep our minds and hearts in the companionship and will of the Holy Spirit, this day and forever more. Amen.

[1]

These ideas are found in this article:

[http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/11/what-is-a-poem/281835/?utm\\_source=SFFB](http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/11/what-is-a-poem/281835/?utm_source=SFFB)