

“God Is an Artist”
Wendy Marble
First United Methodist Church of Palmetto
February 8, 2009

Psalm 104

1Corinthians 1:18-25

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Wendy Marble, I am married to Bob Marble who is much loved in this church, and I am humbled to be the mother of Christian Marble whom you know as the Youth Director intern from last summer. Recently I graduated from the University of South Florida with a degree in Fine Arts, which will help you understand the title of my sermon today. For those of you who do know me, I want to take this opportunity to thank you for the eight years of prayer and encouragement. When you tell me “congratulations,” I can't help but think, “Well, if I'm so clever why didn't I do this thirty years ago like so many of my peers?” But to be honest it has been a profound journey and challenge that I could not have appreciated in the same way when I was younger, so I praise God for the opportunity and thank you all for supporting me in the body of Christ.

It's a bold statement to make: “God is an artist.” Before I explain myself, let me say that one part of me doesn't want to say anything at all about God. I stand before the holiness of our Creator, humbled by the inadequacy of words, pictures or music to depict Him and His mysteries. But the very fact that we DO imagine God and try to describe him is the foundation for my statement. We don't come to church for proof of God, we leave empirical research to the scientists. If something requires proof or verification, then it isn't Faith. Or as Saint Augustine put it: “If you think you understand, then it isn't God.”

That is not to say that God is anti-intellectual, after all He created our minds and intellects. But the scripture I read from Corinthians explains that God doesn't think like we do; even his most careless daydream would be wiser than all our combined history of learning. I believe that God makes himself known to us through revelation, and revelation can only be born in the imagination.

Such an encounter between human and divine is expressed and responded to in the language of metaphor and symbol. A metaphor is when one thing is likened to another as if it WERE that other. For example, I am not saying that God is LIKE an artist, I'm saying He IS an artist. Not because it's literally true, but because I appeal to your imagination to compare the two, God and artists. A symbol is, in simplest terms, a thing that stands for an idea. You might say an artist is a person who paints, but the artist also represents the idea of a creative force.

After having been an artist all my life, I have some thoughts about how to define one. I grew up in a culture that said making artwork is either a waste of time or a pleasant hobby. Most of the world believes that the closer an artist can come to making a painting look like a photograph, the better artist he is. Actually, no: this sort of pictorial illusion is a skill or a craft. It is not the end goal but rather a means to fine art. Good art, like a revelation from God, must show you

something new however small, it must change you, it must send you away different from what you were before you came to it. It took me a lifetime to realize that the thing that really defined me as an artist was not how well I drew but rather the way that I perceived and thought about the world, differently from those around me. Naturally I tried to hide it and be still, to conform. But now God is calling me to my uniqueness.

Artmaking is also a compulsion, so I agree with my college advisor who said the only reason to be an artist is because you can't help it. Those of you who grew up in the Modernist tradition were told that artists and poets are often eccentric or bohemian loners who were touched with what Plato referred to as "divine madness." It's certainly a stretch to look for a comparison between God and the tattooed, sleep-deprived and often freakish agnostics whom I was proud to call my fellow students.

But here, I said "seeing things differently", now we're getting to the heart of it. Preoccupied with expressing things others can't or won't talk about. Looking for a way to transform or affect. Asking "What if? What are the possibilities?" Granted, this is the beginning of creative thinking in any field. But the artist responds through the imagination, using images, metaphors and symbols, the creative language of God, to answer the questions.

Why do I call it "the creative language of God?" The initial idea, the Big Bang, something where there was nothing before. Cosmos instead of Chaos. That's God's creative power. We call it Logos, The Word, the power of God through Creation that was in the beginning and flows through His universe today. To express the inexpressible, that is what artists are about. To express the inexpressible power of God, He uses revelation, which comes through imagination, which speaks in images. Imagination is not the same as imaginary, or unreal. It is no accident that the scientists are discovering that the main way that we are different from the animals is because although many species of animals can learn, we are the only ones who teach. This requires imagination, which, fortunately, God created specifically to communicate with us. He calls us to be like little children, to see and hear his Word, to see angels like we did before our world told us to hush, told us that if we can't touch it, then it isn't real.

He also reaches us through Scripture; open your bible to any page and you will see it is filled with poetic or storytelling images. Did you listen to the words of Psalm 104 that Tim/Jane read for you earlier? "He wraps himself in light as with a garment; he stretches out the heavens like a tent and lays the beams of his upper chambers on their waters. He makes the clouds his chariot and rides on the wings of the wind." Can you picture it?

But what else is called 'the Word of God'? "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Jesus Christ, the Son with the Father, the Light of the world, the Incarnation...to us these are all spiritual truths and also highly powerful symbols that started with the narrative of a specific man in human history...so many levels of truth and meaning beyond what science can offer us. God calls us to be like little children, to listen to the story and believe it.

Like children, an artist must have an open imagination and a courageous one, for he is often exploring the dark side of the divine, the mysteries and paradoxes of God as well as his creative

power in nature, that awesome and overwhelming Nature we call “the sublime” which teaches us “the fear of the Lord.” Artists don’t back down from suffering, but feel it so they can show it to us in new ways. Didn’t God do this as well by coming to earth as a man?

Being an artist is also a way, a metaphor, for me to relate to God. I find, after a lifetime of thought and experience in artmaking, I cannot separate my understanding of the creative process from my perception of God.

An artist is a birthgiver. How’s that for an image, those of you who have gone through or witnessed childbirth? The comparisons to the concept and process of artmaking are too many to list here, but the artist has a choice, to refuse or to say, like Mary did to God, “be it unto me as thou wilt.” But after the surrender to conception, the artist must be willing to nurture, struggle, and be utterly changed.

An artist, while creating, lives totally in the present moment, which Christians know is where we meet God. In that enchanted space some people call “the Zone,” I come closest to the peace and balance that I find in meditative prayer. Surely that is a connection to the divine, a way of communion through creativity in tandem and harmony with the Creator.

The artist must listen. After receiving a revelation, the initial spark of an idea, he must begin to work, but he must also listen, and be willing to get out of the way of the work. This may strike you as odd, most of you are accustomed to imagining an artist as simply drawing or painting or writing the picture in his head, and when the picture appears in front of him like the one in his head, then he’s finished. Becoming an artist has cured me of this sense of control. Once a work is birthed it has personality, even will, of its own. My favorite cartoon shows an artist walking into his studio, and the bubble over his head says “Create,” but the bubble over the empty canvas says, “Resist.” I have drawn or painted pictures of women and stood back and said, “there you are: welcome.” Sometimes I have even been a little frightened of a new presence that came out of my hand. The projects I made for my senior thesis show last semester were constantly evolving, and were even quite loud about what they wanted or didn’t want from me. As I perfect these peculiar listening skills, though, I am amazed and humbled by the results, just like I am when I take the time to listen to God.

But sometimes an artist must be silent. It used to bother me that I would leave projects unfinished for awhile, until I learned that walking away from the work is an essential step in the creative process. So I am not afraid of God’s silence, because just like I am still present with and absorbed in the work even when I’m not touching it, I know God is present to me. I heard a wonderful story about some women in a bible study who decided to find out just what happens during the scriptural metaphor of “a refiner’s fire” and so they contacted a jewelry maker and asked if they could watch him as he smelted gold. The way I understood it, it was a slow process that required the jeweler to watch the melting gold intently. “How do you know when it’s finished?” the women asked. “When I can see my face reflected in it,” the artist replied. I believe God does the same with me. Like an artist, only He knows when I’m ready.

If we call God creator, then the metaphor of artist is obvious. His Word makes cosmos from chaos in the initial concept, His breath is the first touch of the artist’s hand, and our uniqueness is

the Artist's mark or style. He decides at every step of the process of creation whether His work should be finished or destroyed and begun again.

But did you know that a work of art has two lives, two significant relationships? The first is with the artist in that process of creation. The second is when the art goes out into the world to be viewed. The art exists for the artist but also for you, the viewer or participator. Not all art theorists agree with me but I believe that the viewers add to the life of the work. Humans can't help but ascribe meaning or attach a story to everything they see, whether it's right or wrong, whether it fits the artist's original intent or not.

You could think of these two lives as Creation and Existence. We were created for one purpose, but our existence in the world often sees us affected by our viewers, misunderstood, taken out of context, devalued, even damaged or stored in a closet sometimes. We require that restoration and transformation that comes from the touch of the artist, from the word of God. This morning I have described that word as operating on our imagination through revelation, through the metaphors and narratives of Scripture, and through the powerful symbols associated with the life of Jesus Christ.

Look behind me on the back wall above the altar. A skilled cabinetmaker said to me recently, "Just think of it...two pieces of wood." I said to you that the way to recognize fine art is by the way it transforms you. One of the marks of God as the greatest artist is that there is nothing so ordinary that He cannot make it sacred. The cross is one of the most powerful symbols on earth, striking both horror and hope, both fear and love in the hearts of millions down through the ages. It is one of the first marks primitive man made on cave walls and is one of the most elementary mathematical and geometrical signs. For many religions it symbolizes the tree of life, the world tree, the way to heaven. There are hundreds of variations on the cross shape, and some celebrities try to appropriate or trivialize its power through jewelry and tattoos. But for us it is still both a way to die and a way to live. God speaks to us through two pieces of wood, through one man who lived two thousand years ago, through the light in these windows, through the face of a loved one, through natural creation both terrifying and tiny. Today I ask you, as an artist and a sister in Christ, do not reject God's working in your imagination as unscientific or unreal, it is His language. Look around. Listen. Participate. Create.