

Wednesday February 15, 2012

The invisible becomes apparent

By Jim Taylor

Hoarfrost came down the other night. No, that's not quite correct. Snow comes down -- hoarfrost just appears. Somehow, out of the air, moisture condenses on leaves, on twigs, on stalks of grass, in an infinity of crystalline improvisations.

And when daylight comes, ah, what beauty shines forth. The next morning, every blade of the long brown grass along the side of the road sprayed upward like a fountain. Ponderosa pines raised silvery pompoms high in the air. Oregon grape leaves shimmered with diamond dust. Even chain link fences traced networks of light.

The world was transformed.

I remember driving out of Edmonton one similar morning. The trees, the fields, the fences blended in a symphony of white. Until I saw it, I would not have believed there could be so many shades of white, all in perfect harmony with each other.

And yet conditions had changed only fractionally from the night before. The same air, the same trees, the same humidity -- except that what had been invisible was now visible.

Lingering convictions

Hoarfrost helps me reflect on my experience of God.

I long ago gave up any belief in God as a supernatural being, somewhere "out there," wherever that is.

That kind of God seems to me to be a hangover from days when we believed the earth was flat; heaven was up there, and hell was down below. That perception of the world faded when Columbus didn't sail over the edge. It took its final beating when Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin first circled the planet in space. He said he looked for heaven, up there, and didn't see it.

But the notion persists. The conviction that God, if there is a God, must be separate, distinct, and different. That God must be perfect, while this earthly existence is soiled, stained -- what poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called "smeared, bleared with toil..."

In this view, that distant deity calmly watches while we humans fumble and bumble -- but occasionally stirs the pot a little, to benefit his favourites and discombobulate his foes.

That's not how I experience God. Not any more.

Change in temperature

God is more like hoarfrost. Or like the humidity that hung invisibly in the air the evening before. I moved through it. I breathed it. It was all around me, touching every part of me. But I wasn't aware of it.

Until a tiny change in temperature turned that humidity into hoarfrost. And I became aware of something that had been there all along.

Don't misunderstand me here -- I'm not equating God with nature. Mountains don't care who won the Super Bowl. Trees do not clap their hands when you fall in love. Stars do not weep when a baby dies.

But God does.

That's the difference. Nature is not necessarily hostile -- it simply doesn't care. But God does celebrate, does weep, does care.

Except that we're not aware of that transparent presence until something changes the temperature of life -- a birth, a death, a success, a failure -- and makes that holy presence as evident as hoarfrost on a wintry morning.

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YOUR TURN

I wondered if last week's column, about Jonah, would come across as old stuff to most of you. Well, if it did, you managed to find some new angles in reflecting on it.

Jane Downs Wallbrown confessed that Jonah was "one of my favorite sermons! I get a bit miffed when most folks young and old just know the whale story. They miss the best part! Of course, I also like the first part where Jonah doesn't want to do what God's asking him to do so goes in the opposite direction. It sounds so like me...."

James Russell wrote, "James Russell: Hurrah for speaking out against 'victim's justice' and the cult of revenge. Everyone needs to be reminded from time to time that these are dangerous and addictive drugs, that we are accorded both rewards and punishments that we don't deserve."

Instead of vengeance, James recommended the old adage, "Do I not also destroy my enemies, when I make them friends?"

Jim McKean just said, "Thanks for allowing me to see myself in the mirror."

John McTavish managed to find a connection to his favorite novelist: "A contemporary application of this prophetic tale might be found in John Updike's 2006 novel *Terrorist*, which includes an epigraph from Jonah: "And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live. And the Lord said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?'"

"The Muslim terrorist in Updike's story makes us very angry. But is it right for us to be angry? Read the novel and one can see what Updike -- and Jonah -- are getting at. As Updike told *Time* magazine at the time of the novel's publication: "Clearly, there's going to be a global crisis in the amount of petroleum in the world. There's only so much, and there are more people wanting it. No wonder the Third World is sore at us. We're spending the limited reserves of resources about as fast as we can. Our solution is to waste it all and then punt and see what we might do next."

Mary-Margaret Boone commented, "Your Jonah message was bang on. We never get to the end of that passage in the lectionary, but I took it there. Jonah was an angry man and even his God lessons (thrown overboard, swallowed by the giant fish and eventually travelling to Ninevah) however that transpired for him, was not enough to recognize the breadth of God's forgiveness."

Carl Freeto wrote, "Jonah, it seems to me, is given the chance to act as his God acts, and fails. The one who suffers from the belief that 'bad' people should be punished is Jonah himself. He could have joy at God's mercy, but chooses not to.

"I really like [the way] that the storyteller leaves us hanging...does Jonah get it? (I doubt it, but you do not know). Two things stand out...I know how Jonah feels and I know that he is wrong."

There is nothing to be done to right a wrong," Carl mused, "except to commit another wrong.

"What is really scary is when many Jonahs get together on top of that hill and tell God to go away so they can exact their own 'justice'. I'm hopeful that the One who put me in the belly of a whale and pulled me out for the sake of those I despise will remind me that mercy is justice."

Isabel Gibson suggested, "I sometimes think that we confuse 'justice' with 'fairness'. The age-old cry of the young is that something 'isn't fair!' Never mind that we have enough -- if someone else has more, it's not fair! As for crime and punishment, that's even harder, because the stakes are so much higher. How to forgive someone who has devastated you, or someone you love? How best to prevent them from doing it again? How to meet the demand of a rational society to somehow tailor the punishment to the crime? Meeting hate with love seems like a mug's game -- but meeting hate with hate, pursuing vengeance instead of mercy, is a game no one wins."

Finally, Charles Hill (who works professionally with a variety of people caught up in criminal activities, issued a plea: "Please do not confuse protection of society with getting revenge... It really feels good to throw away the key or execute somebody who does something we could never do, or so we think. Many are blind to their own weaknesses. Who hasn't had a murderous thought cross their minds when someone nearly hit you on the highway? Trashing Ninevah would have made Jonah feel morally superior....he would never do what they did!"

Charles added a further caution about labelling people as "child molesters. [Only] about 10% of those who get that label" are true pedophiles, he suggested. "A true pedophile, lover of children, can't be cured. He/she will do it again and again until removed from society.. We know who they are but the evidence isn't admissible in court.

"A lot more than that will go back to jail, probably 60% [of offenders], but it will be for drug charges, theft or some other crime... [So the] 90% suffer revenge out of fear of [what] the other 10%. [might do].

In a further letter, Charles clarified his point: Approximately 50%-60% will go back to jail for something; [they're] are in the non-pedophile category but were charged with a sex offense (any sexual contact or exposing of genitals) against someone under 18. The problem is that [this new offence] is reported as recidivism, but what actually sent them back to jail is not reported."

ABOUT MY BOOKS, ETC.

I still have a few copies of a book my father wrote exploring Christian theology through Christian art.

The problem with art, of course, is that it cannot put an abstract concept on canvas. An artist cannot paint an Incarnation or a Resurrection without putting real humans, in real situations, into the picture. The expression, therefore, has to be grounded in a particular culture and society; the infinite and universal has to be represented in finite terms.

My father – who once took art lessons from members of Canada's Group of Seven – spent much of his life after retiring as principal of the Vancouver School of Theology, seeking out the ways artists through the centuries had attempted to deal with this dilemma. I'm probably biased, but I think that in examining the ways art portrays theological concepts, he explained those concepts better than most theological texts.

The book is "Seeing the Mystery: Exploring Christian Faith through the Eyes of Artists," by William S. Taylor, 94 pages. There are only about 20 copies left in the world. Most of the illustrations are in full colour.

If you would like a copy, write to me – Jim Taylor, 1300 6th Street, Lake Country, BC, Canada, V4V 2H7.

Unfortunately, I can't send these out on the honour system, as I do with my biblical paraphrases. I will have to charge \$30 Canadian to include postage, paid in advance.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Model T Websites." a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <<http://www.modeltwebsites.com>>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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