

IN OUR MIDST

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Arthur M Suggs
Preached on the 21st Sunday after Pentecost, October 9, 2016

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Does Camille Ring a Bell? 190 mph!

I was taught as a child that, in polite company, you don't talk about sex or politics. At the moment, though, this is the sort of thing that's going on, so let's talk about the weather.

Right now, we've got Hurricane Matthew, which is probably going to have been the cause of around a thousand deaths, and who knows how much damage. A serious storm, Matthew is finally heading out to sea.

Four years ago, in 2012, we had Hurricane Sandy, and many of us from this congregation helped in the cleanup and relief efforts that were centered mostly in the Long Island area. And you might remember the name Katrina in 2005. That one set a record for the most damage in dollar amounts. Going back, there were Andrew in 1992, Hugo in 1989, and Camille in 1969.

Does Camille ring a bell? It set a record in that weather observers had to estimate sustained wind speeds, not gusts, because all the anemometers were destroyed by the very winds these instruments were supposed to have measured. The estimate came in at a sustained 190 miles per hour.

Hurricanes become dangerous at Category III, which is 111-129 mph. Category IV is 130-156 mph. Category V, the highest category, is 157 mph or more. Even Camille wasn't the worst. It was the typhoon Haiyan

that ravaged the Philippines just a few years ago in 2013, which hit sustained miles per hour of 220. You can imagine the cost in lives and damage.

Fear Is the God of the Storm

This is just a brief overview of some of the hurricanes of late. As Weatherman Al Roker says, "Here's what's happening in your neck of the woods." And we had a 500-year flood in 2006 and another one in 2011.

Primitive religions have always feared some kind of "God of the storm." In Job 37:5, "God thunders wondrously with his voice."

Have you ever been near a serious lightning bolt? I've had that experience about 100 yards away from me, the closest one that I've ever seen and heard. At my first church, in Pennsylvania, I happened to be looking out the window when the building was struck. I raced outside, expecting to see the church destroyed by the blast because it sounded like a bomb going off. To my great relief, there was a lightning rod all the way up to the chimney at the top that absorbed the strike. There was not even a single brick missing.

Think about this with me — sustained winds above 157 miles per hour. I don't think our church roof would have been able to outlast such a blow. Dave Moody repointed our chimney a couple years ago, but all the bricks of the chimney would undoubtedly have landed in this sanctuary. The windows would

have blown in. A building can't sustain that kind of wind unless it's built like a bomb shelter.

Watching Matthew Inspires a Quote

Watching Matthew on the news reminded me of one of my favorite quotes from one of my favorite authors, Annie Dillard. In her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, she writes:

“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning.

It is madness to wear straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return”

It's difficult to talk about the power of winds of, say, 200 mph. We really don't have any kind of feeling for that. Yet we know what sustained winds above 157 mph can do.

We Have Trouble Talking about God

Now let me do a slight shift and say there's another thing that we have trouble with in talking about God. I'll try to bring the thought back toward a conclusion at the end of the sermon.

The other thing that we have a lot of trouble talking about, at least with any kind of accuracy or precision, is divinity. That is, what is God? We have four ways of talking about God, and we use all four interchangeably, but one of them is used more than the others.

- The first option of talking about God is that God is all of something, everything — omnipotent, all-powerful, all-mighty, invincible, all-creative.
- The second option is that God is none of something — infinite, eternal unlimited, immutable.
- The third option is to make direct statements — holy, sacred, love, spirit, grace, one.
- The fourth option of talking about God is an innumerable number of metaphors, some sacred and many fanciful — Lord, Creator, Maker, King of kings, Great Spirit, Prime Mover, Father/Mother, the Great Person up There, God of the Mountains.

So we say, for example, that God is omnipotent, all-knowing, and the like. God is all of this and none of that, direct and metaphorical, yet we use these terms simply to describe God. These are not capable of being changed outside of normal constraints.

There are times when we can talk about God directly, but they are also less than satisfactory. So if we use a few direct words, we can say God is holy, God is love, God is life, God is truth. And those are fine descriptions of the indescribable, but they actually don't get us very far. If you put on any kind of scientific mindset in terms of using your language to advance your understanding, such terms don't advance comprehension in any significant way.

What is truth? Pilate, the one-time procurator of Judea, asked. Well, you've got your perspective on something, you've got my perspective on something, and somebody else's perspective. The Truth with a capital T? It's harder to get a grasp on that.

What is life? In a sermon about a year or so ago, I talked about a NASA initiative to Mars, and that agency decided that, if we're going to Mars and look for life, how are we going to know if we find it? So they brought together a group of brilliant scientists to try to define life prior to going to Mars. After much highfalutin intellectual discussion, they gave up. They couldn't do it. They couldn't come up with a definition of life.

What is holiness? Do we have a sense for what is sacred versus what is profane? We're not able to say what holiness really is.

This Leaves Us with the Fourth Option

God is all of this. God is none of that. God is a few things that we can say directly, and then the fourth option is that God is metaphor. God is like this. God is unlike this, and we use those metaphors a lot.

We always talk about God as the Father, using the traditional language. Then in recent times, we have modified it to being parental, realizing that it's God who created genders, and therefore God is above and beyond the notion of gender. But we still use God the Father a whole lot, so it's a way of saying, okay, imagine you're a good and perfect father, and God is at least like that, above and beyond it, but at least like that.

God Is a Little Like a Hen

In the Psalms, there's a marvelous passage in which God is likened to a hen, a mother hen with her chicks underneath her wings. Some

of you have seen little chicks running around, and they get scared by something. A hawk flies over or a fox comes near, and they'll run. The mom will spread her wings to cover them all up perfectly, and the chicks are completely motionless and silent.

This is an image that says, yes, that helps us. God is a little bit like that. We have the image of the potter with the clay. We have all seen that in craft stores, or we do it ourselves. You're sitting there working to create something that's malleable. You're trying to make it as beautiful or as functional as you can, and it ends up being a very potent metaphor. Yes, God is like that, but in connection with our lives.

Lovers. Putting your head on someone's shoulder or lovemaking with the supreme bliss and joy of it. So it says, yes, in touch with divinity, it's sort of like that.

In ancient times, the idealized form of governing was the benevolent dictator, the king who actually cared about you. Most of them didn't, but every once in a while, one did. This notion is of being the servant, the serf, the peasant, but you have somebody with authority and intelligence and power looking out for you. So God is like a benevolent king, who actually does care about the common people.

Three Metaphors in a Row plus One

In Luke there are three metaphors in a row. In Chapter 17, God is likened to a poor woman, living alone in her one-room abode, and she loses one of her coins and is going to look until she finds it. She will not stop until then.

This story is followed by one about a shepherd with a hundred sheep, but only ninety-nine come back to the fold. And so he goes

looking for the one and doesn't give up until he finds the one.

Then follows the story of the father, who receives with joy the lost son who finally returns. Put these three together, and they become pretty powerful.

Yes, this is a little bit of what God is like. Searching out the lost, never giving up on the one who is missing somehow or other. Another story is about the vinedresser, and we're each an individual vine, part of the field, but someone is looking out for us, tending us, making sure that we are healthy and growing.

This is a wonderful collection of metaphors throughout the scriptures. You combine them, add them all up, and it becomes pretty powerful. You get a feeling for what we're dealing with when we otherwise have trouble talking about it directly.

One Metaphor Surpasses All Others . . .

. . . One that's supreme. One of them is at a level above all the others, and that's Spirit. It's actually one of the names given to God and the Trinity. It's the Spirit, and it comes from a word that means breath or wind. That's why I talked about storms at the beginning of the sermon.

In the primitive mind, for example, at death they used the word that you ex-spire. In other words, you breathe out. That's your last breath. Your spirit goes out. Your breath goes out, your wind goes out at death. When you get a good idea, when some creative notion enters into your mind, you become in-spired.

That spirit, that breath, that wind comes into you. Something that is dead must be reanimated. That was the Latin term for spirit. It

becomes animated; it becomes alive again. So this notion of spirit, breath, and wind in Greek and Hebrew and Latin, in virtually all these ancient languages, the spirit indicates exactly the same thing, that God is likened to our breath. God breathed into them, and they became living beings.

If the Tank Blows, You Die

Never was this metaphor brought home to me up close and personal until shortly after my ordination. I took scuba lessons in a swimming pool, and there was one part of the course that was frightening to me. Going under water and actually scuba diving, even down to 50, 60, or even a hundred feet — that wasn't the frightening part. It was the tank. You fill up one of those tanks with somewhere between 2,200 and 2,500 pounds per square inch. Imagine being beside a car tire at a blowout of 32 psi.

Being beside one of these tanks when it blows up is pretty much the end of you. You die, the room that you're in is destroyed, and anybody around you is in the hospital or dead. With 2,500 psi exploding near you, you're not going to make it.

There's a device that takes that power, that pressure, and gives it to you with your sensitive lung tissue, at four pounds per square inch. That ugly device that you put in your mouth doesn't make you look sexy at all. When you breathe in, your diaphragm goes down and you create a slight vacuum. The genius of that device is it takes that tiny bit of vacuum and triggers the release of just a little air at four pounds per square inch, something that's not going to harm your lungs at all.

And when I understood the genius of that mechanical device vis-à-vis the 2,500 pounds of pressure, putting those two together gave me

a feeling for the strength of that metaphor. Unbelievable, dangerous power! And also gentle, life-giving breath. They're both right together.

A Listing of the Supreme Metaphor

So what I'd like to ask you to do in the context of Matthew is to look at the fullness of this one supreme metaphor that we have for understanding divinity.

Here's a list: You've got hurricanes and tornadoes. You have summer breezes. You have blizzards, bringing in two feet of snow such that your cheeks are red and your hat is blown off, and you've got to get the snowplow out yet again. You have spring winds that are just perfect for kites, that also have the advantage of drying the fields prior to planting. Imagine once again, your lover and his or her head on your shoulder. You're ly-

ing there together, and you feel the breath of your lover.

Have You Ever . . . ?

Have you ever had the chance to see either a hummingbird or a bee at a flower? Look an inch or so below it, and you'll see the petals fluttering from the wings of the bee or the hummingbird.

Have you ever looked at a glass-smooth pond when a breeze kicks up, and you'll see a patch of ripples appear where the breeze had come down and swept across the water? Or have you watched an autumn leaf swaying? Or have you watched a candle flicker as a person walks by?

The collection of these metaphors is the power to describe the divinity that is outside of us, unbelievably powerful but also life-giving breath within each one of us.

Amen.