Metaphor and Religious Language: Poetic Imagination in the Bible

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Preacher: Rev. Joel Strecker

[0:00] Gracious Lord, you caused all Holy Scripture to be written for our learning. We pray now that we may so read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest what is in the Bible, that through patience and comfort of your Holy Word, we may embrace, hold fast, and enter fully into the fullness of everlasting life.

Amen.

Amen. Joel, please come and take over, and I will get out of your way as I promised.

Well, thank you, Dr. Packer, for that warm introduction. I'm Joel Strecker, as he mentioned. I'm an Artizo intern here at St. John's. This is coming to the end of my first year. And I'm also a student at Regent, and I'm coming to the end of my fifth year.

So a little-known fact, although some of you will know this, is when I first came to Vancouver five years ago, Learner's Exchange is where I first became acquainted with the people of St. John's.

[1:47] And Lenore Cummings over there, and I don't see Kurt moan at the moment. But they, in particular, welcomed me in. And so I was very warmly welcomed and very intellectually challenged in this environment.

It was tremendously encouraging, and it's a tremendous privilege today to be on the other end of that, speaking to all of you. So, our topic of discussion today, by way of title, is Metaphor and Religious Language, Poetic Imagination in the Bible.

Broadly speaking, we might enter into that topic with a question. How, in what way, does human language speak of a transcendent God?

That we, as the body of Christ, claim to be able to speak truly about God, he whom we have not seen, is a remarkable and audacious claim.

And this audacity to speak of the divine has been a central critique against Christianity, and indeed against many religions, from empiricists and rationalists and the like.

[2:58] They would presume to speak of the world as it is. That is to say, the sensible world, to which Christianity is seen as the antithesis, chasing after fairy tales.

Now, often at the center of that critique is a contention that Christianity only speaks metaphorically about God, and as such is not really speaking about anything at all.

Because metaphors do not refer. They are an endless deferral of meaning. Now, as Christians, we would naturally disagree that our speech of God does not ultimately refer to him in whom we live and move and have our being.

And we might argue that while its true Christian speech relies upon metaphor, science is not actually exempt from this reliance. Nonetheless, my sense is that at times, the church, particularly in the West, has taken on some of the philosophical presuppositions of modernity.

In our discussion for today, this would include presuppositions about human language. And one consequence of this is an unhealthy tendency in some circles to view scripture as a doctrinal instruction manual, from which we extract the nectar of pure truth and discard the pulp once we're done.

[4:22] Such a view of scripture is static and one-dimensional at its very worst. Scripture, as Hebrews 4 reminds us, is a living and active word which confronts, convicts, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, transforms our hearts and our minds.

So my lecture today seeks to counter some of that perceived deficit. Perhaps I'm tilting at windmills, though I suspect not, and will do this through an exploration of metaphor.

So we ask, in what ways does the Bible speak of God? How is it that God is a shepherd, a rock, a shield, a hen gathering in her brood?

Now, when our fearless moderator first asked me for a title on this lecture, I have to confess I left it fairly vague, because I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to say, and I needed some wiggle room.

Now, part of the difficulty lies in the fact that metaphor and religious language in and of itself is a very broad topic. Questions we could ask would include, what is a metaphor? Can metaphors be true and false?

[5:39] Can metaphors be paraphrased or reduced to literal speech? Is theology, that is to say, our speech about God, necessarily and always metaphorical?

Why does the Bible seem to use so many metaphors? What's the difference between a metaphor and an idol? If metaphors admit a breadth of interpretation, how do we claim to be under the authority of a metaphor?

And so forth. Now, these are all very interesting questions. But we can't deal with all, or even many of them, in 60 minutes, in a terribly satisfactory manner.

Scholarship has, as scholarship is often wont, spilled a great deal of ink on any one of these questions. And I can't pretend to be a scholar, despite having received an excellent education at Regent College.

Careful searches through library catalogs will reveal, in the last 30 years or so, there's been a veritable explosion of research on metaphor. From the disciplines of philosophy, literary studies, biblical studies, theology, history, and so on.

[6:46] Metaphor, at least in the academy these days, is a hot commodity. And it'd be a full-time job to keep abreast of even half of it. So with that apology offered, my lecture will consist broadly of two parts.

The first half will concern itself with some of the central characteristics of metaphor. The second half will seek to apply these observations to the discipline of Bible reading.

And the little kind of interlay with each other. A central argument from this lecture, an argument of which I've become increasingly persuaded during my time at Regent, of which I hope to persuade you, is that there is no such thing as a mere metaphor.

That in fact, metaphors are a fundamental component of human thought and speech. They have the potential to be rich wellsprings of inspiration and indeed revelation.

Within the context of learners' exchange and our quadrilateral of church history, Bible, Anglicanism, and applied faith, this means we'll consider a particular understanding of metaphor, how it intersects with Christian theology, and our reading of scripture, which I would venture is about as practical as you can get.

[8:00] So, although we will end up wandering through a few brambly bits, what will follow this morning is fundamentally a modest layperson's attempt to explore some of the metaphorical speech about God that we find in scripture.

And I'll seek to offer some thoughts as to how we ought to read and respond to these metaphors which God gives us about himself. So, firstly, what is a metaphor?

Our good friend Aristotle defines metaphor as a transference of meaning. Metaphor, he writes in his Poetics, consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else.

The transference being either from genus to species, from species to genus, from species to species, or on grounds of analogy. All right, you might think.

What exactly does that mean? Many of the examples Aristotle gives us would probably no longer be considered metaphors today. But his definition of metaphor via analogy is fairly interesting.

[9:11] And it represents a sort of acme in this human ability to transfer meaning between terms. The reason Aristotle gives for this is that transference of meaning via analogy requires one to notice a previously unrecognized similarity between objects which are proportionally related.

So in logic, we might say A is to B as C is to D. Or the relationship which obtains between two objects is equivalent to the relationship which obtains between two other objects.

And we could apply this schema to some of Jesus' parables with reasonable success. So for example, in Matthew 12, when Jesus is rebuking the Pharisees, he says to them, either make the tree good and its fruit good or make the tree bad and its fruit bad for the tree is known by its fruit.

Analogically, we would say A tree is to its fruit as a person is to his words and actions. And this analogical relationship, which we now recognize because of Jesus' teaching, would allow us to produce sentences like A person's fruit, by which we would be referring to the evidence for the manner of a life lived.

And once this resemblance, or perhaps relationship, has been understood, it invites a whole host of comparisons. Because, to borrow a phrase from Wittgenstein, we are now seeing as.

[10:54] Our mind's eye, we might say, has been transformed. Now, some metaphors can be fairly banal, so ubiquitous that we don't even really attend to them.

Thus, we can speak about the shoulder of the highway, and we effectively take it as literal speech. But other metaphors can be quite striking, and persistently so, inviting a great deal of reflection.

So, for example, in John 6, after feeding the 5,000, Jesus declares to his disciples that he is the bread of life. And this metaphor not only causes us to reflect upon the miracle just performed, but also upon the Exodus story in the Old Testament, and the bread provided in the wilderness to the Israelites.

When we see this in light of Luke 22 and the institution of the Lord's Supper, when Jesus says, this is my body which is given for you, we are drawn ever deeper into this contemplation of what Jesus is saying when he calls himself the bread of life.

And Jesus makes this comparison explicit to the crowd in John 6, 53 to 58. contemplation of this metaphor is so central to Christianity that it's woven into the very liturgical rhythm of the church.

[12:19] Such metaphors, contends Aristotle, these arresting, thought-changing, life-orienting metaphors are a sign of genius. Now, Aristotle's discussion of metaphor is not a bad place to start, but we certainly cannot end there.

or rather, Aristotle's discussion is fruitful, but could use some elaboration. Now, sometimes Aristotle is accused of offering an overly simplistic substitutionary view of metaphor where you start with a straightforward utterance and then you dress it up in poetical guard by substituting one term for another.

And if we posit that a certain relationship attains between two sets of equivalent objects, we might then conclude, all metaphors can more or less be restated in a straightforward manner.

So if we take Jesus' statement, I am the light of the world in John 8, maybe we exchange it, substitute it, for a more literal proposition like, I am the savior of all people, where light is substituted for salvation, drawing on the language of Isaiah 60, and the world substituted for all people.

But is that all that Jesus is saying when he calls himself the light of the world? And if we contend that metaphors are just a fanciful way of saying what can be said plainly, why bother with metaphors at all?

[13:46] Why not just use literal speech? Such was the opinion of John Locke, who in his famous work an essay concerning human understanding had the following to say.

I read it in full because it's fairly funny. But yet, if we would speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness, all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment.

And so, indeed, are perfect cheats. And where truth and knowledge are concerned, cannot but be thought a great fault. He goes on shortly after, eloquence, like the fairer sex, has two prevailing beauties in it to suffer itself ever to be spoken against.

And it is in vain to find fault with those arts of deceiving, wherein men find pleasure to be deceived. So that's a fairly grim indictment of metaphor. And Locke's critique of the figurative application of words among which we could include metaphor is that it fundamentally misleads judgment.

Because, after all, a metaphor could be said plainly, couldn't it? And metaphors, along with all the other tropes, are, for Locke, perfect cheats, which continue to exist only where men take pleasure in deception.

[15:20] But Locke's attack on rhetoric and fanciful speech is actually a defense of empiricism, empiricism, and one suspects he was probably aware of it. Because if we are only to discuss that which can be measured and quantified, that which can be observed sensibly, words need to correspond with precision to the observed reality in a one-to-one relationship, or else the entire enterprise falls apart.

In empiricism, we are talking about a sterile world of things as they are, which admits no poetry. As it turns out, Locke can't get off so easily in dismissing metaphor when he himself uses a metaphor in the just-quoted passage.

You might have noticed it yourself. He compares eloquence to the fairer sex, whose beauties are too prevailing to be spoken against. Another metaphor, which, presumably, Locke would be forced to admit, if we're going to take his argument seriously, contains propositional content.

There's something going on with metaphor. But, if we are to dismiss John Locke and his substitutionary view of metaphor, there's an equally dangerous peril in the opposite direction, that of arguing that metaphors are fundamentally opaque and perfectly unintelligible.

Under the view of certain philosophers, metaphorical utterances are actually nonsense, meaning precisely what they say, but having no content.

[16:50] It's then up to the hearer or the reader of the metaphor to decide on their own terms what to make of it. Utterances like, I am the good shepherd, according to some, are only understood by Christians a certain way because of social convention.

We've been trained in how to read the metaphor. In another social setting, we could take that metaphor as a reading to Jesus' prowess with livestock. And it would be an equally valid interpretation because metaphors, under this view, do not refer to anything.

They contain no truth, no falsity. Now, a similar line of thinking attributes to metaphors only an emotive power, but contrary to Locke, don't denigrate that emotional impact.

This is often the view of liberal Protestantism, which might say something like, of course Jesus is not actually the good shepherd, but to say it provides me with emotional comfort and a means of conceiving the very best in humanity.

And that's the real beauty, which is rather disingenuous. The problem with an emotive approach to metaphor is that it has no answer as to why or how a metaphor elicits an emotional response.

[18:08] Certainly it seems true that powerful metaphors elicit powerful responses. But to what precisely are we responding, if to not some sort of content?

How can conscious experience precede language? At the same time, this sort of black box approach to metaphor, where the understanding of the utterance is completely untethered from the words themselves, that suffers a similar problem.

Although we might agree that language is socially conditioned, since indeed all phenomena pertaining to us human creatures are, it's a rather peculiar fact that we seem to interpret metaphors rather readily, and with a great deal of regularity.

And furthermore, if and when we hear a metaphor which we struggle to interpret, we can interrogate the speaker of that metaphor as to precisely what they meant when they said it.

And a felicitous speaker would then offer an explanation of her metaphor. This explanation might not exhaust all the potential in the metaphor, but it would certainly guide us down the right path towards grasping the metaphor.

[19:20] Certain types of riddles operate on precisely this dynamic of human language. Language which communicates, but requires some thought and consideration to understand.

So when Gollum says to Bilbo Baggins, this thing all things devours, birds, beasts, trees, flowers, gnaws iron, bites steel, grinds hard stones to meal, slays king, ruins town, and beats high mountain down, Bilbo gets into a rather tight spot.

Until he finally realizes, Gollum is metaphorically speaking about time. And in fact, we can observe a similar dynamic of interpretive difficulty in many of Jesus' parables, where a story is told to illustrate a point, and the woolly-headed disciples, among which I would include myself, require an explanation as to what precisely Jesus meant when he gave the parable.

So we've rejected the substitutionary view of metaphor. Metaphors cannot be substituted for plain speech. You can't just reduce them to literal statements without something being lost.

And we've also rejected the emotivist theory of metaphor, as I would call it. Metaphors are not just captivating nonsense. What, then, can we do with this slippery creature we call metaphor?

[20:44] So the substitutionary view is helpful in so far as it considers metaphorical audiences to have propositional content. content. The problem is that it oversimplifies what the content might be.

If metaphor is speaking of one thing in terms which are suggestive of another, then perhaps what we have is not a relationship between terms but between networks of ideas or models of reality.

This can be illustrated with two simple examples. So in Act 2, Scene 2, the famous scene between Romeo and Juliet, Romeo gives a metaphorical utterance concerning his beloved.

Juliet is the sun. And if metaphors were simply an interaction between terms, ostensibly we could change one term with a logically equivalent term and maintain the meaning of the metaphor.

So the sun, descriptively, is the largest gaseous mass in our solar system. But, as your mind has already perceived, if Romeo utters, Juliet is the largest gaseous mass in our solar system, the poetry falls flat on its face.

[21:55] Because we know that Juliet is in fact not the largest gaseous mass in the solar system, and to attempt a metaphorical interpretation of that utterance is not particularly flattering to Juliet, and thus contrary to what we already know of Romeo's opinions and affections concerning her.

So perhaps we might say there's a different network of associations connected with the term sun in this example. A second example. We observe a similar effect if we try to exchange terms which are analogically related.

So you'll recall our previous schema A is to B as C is to D. So if old age is to life as sunset is to the day, we might produce the utterance the sunset of life, which offers us a beautiful picture of a life lived well, slipping away in grandeur and beauty.

Very romantic. But if we attempt the inverse utterance, the day's old age, we receive a resolutely different image. If we wanted to clarify why these utterances have such different effects upon us, we would probably say that for most of us, sunsets bring with them a network of positive associations, while the associations we have with old age are not necessarily always positive.

So we see then that the words we use metaphorically have a tendency to smuggle in some cognitive freight, we might say. They bring with them associations.

[23:24] And that's precisely why poems are so fraught with metaphors. An image is worth a thousand words, as the old aphorism goes. And in a metaphor, the skilled poet is able to bring in a vast imaginative network of images and associations, that lie latent in the poem for the reader to discover.

Good metaphors, as with good poetry, demand some careful attention. And the power of metaphor seems to reside precisely here in this liminal space of image and imagination, in the mind's ability to envision, to see something as.

In metaphor, there is both an is and an is not. Yet, as we've argued, metaphors cannot mean just anything. To quote one philosopher of language, metaphors may indeed be pregnant with meaning, but it would be a strange pregnancy if it had no term and if it issued forth in endless streams of progeny.

So, what do metaphors mean? How do we know? How might we constrain our metaphorical interpretation? definition? And there's the rub.

But I would like to argue there are at least three ways in which a metaphor can be constrained. The first constraint is the broader context within which the metaphor is given.

[24:50] And that can include cultural background, social setting, and even the context of a metaphor within a longer speech or a text. context. We don't ever say anything in a vacuum, do we?

And the meaning of our words is always located within these broader contexts. We see this dimension of metaphorical constraint in Jesus' cursing of the fig tree, recorded both in Mark 11 and Matthew 21.

One second, my fingers are sticky. So, Jesus has just cleansed the temple. And then we read, And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there.

In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, May no fruit ever come from you again.

And a fig tree withered at once. Now, some people grossly misunderstand this visual metaphor. because they don't attend to the context.

[26:01] The cultural context, which guides our interpretation, are the oracles of the latter prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, Amos, Micah, because there we see that the fig tree becomes a symbol for the nation of Israel, the nation Israel under judgment.

If we miss this prophetic cultural context, we cannot understand Jesus' curse. So Jesus' metaphor is culturally constrained. The broader life setting within the Gospel of Matthew is also important to help us understand Jesus' curse.

It begins with the anointing of the Spirit in Matthew 3, and Jesus' victory in the wilderness of Matthew 4, which patterns after Israel's failure in the wilderness during the Exodus. And from that moment, at the start of Matthew, we as readers witness a consistent theme, that Jesus is the fulfillment and personification of the law, Israel as she was meant to be.

We see this explicitly in the Beatitudes when Jesus teaches, You have heard it said, but I say to you. And this reaches something of a tipping point in the story in Jesus' triumphal entry at the start of Matthew 21, when Jesus cleanses the temple, demonstrating both authority and the failure of the system.

The broad trajectory of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Matthew constrains or sheds light on Jesus' curse of the fig tree. It's a narrative tension within the Gospel which has reached a resolution.

[27:36] And finally, for this metaphor at least, we also have a geographic setting. After cleansing the temple, Jesus has spent the night in Bethany, and he's coming back into Jerusalem with a city quite literally in the background of the fig tree as he curses it.

In a powerful metaphorical object lesson, Jesus is pronouncing judgment on the nation of Israel as he and his disciples look down on the temple. And if we read this curse in isolation, apart from its context, our interpretations miss the mark.

So context is clearly a very important constraint on our interpretation of metaphor. Now a second constraint on metaphor is personal experience.

When we interpret a metaphor, we bring our experience to bear upon it. We limit what the metaphor will signify for us. Therein lies some of a metaphor's power.

To borrow from Gadamer, there is a fusion of horizons when we encounter a metaphor. My perspective, the metaphor's perspective. And this is easily grasped when we encounter metaphors in other cultures.

[28:52] So for those of us like myself who grew up far from the ocean, the Maori proverb, don't die like an octopus but like a hammerhead, is fairly opaque in its meaning. I have no idea how an octopus dies, nor a hammerhead shark, although I might be able to make a few assumptions.

And so the metaphor remains very difficult to interpret. And this cultural dimension is experienced quite often by translators of the Bible when they seek to bring scriptures to a culture which is far removed from the West and from Iron Age Palestine or first century Greco-Roman culture.

So for example, if you've never seen a sheep, what does it mean to call the Lord your shepherd? How should a translator approach that metaphor? What's actually being said in the metaphor?

And in one sense, this constraint can be a potential danger. There's the possibility that we impose our views onto the metaphor and obscure or misunderstand what the metaphor is attempting to communicate.

But the flip side of this is that when we really get a metaphor, when it finally clicks for us, it opens up a vast vista of understanding, far deeper than any logical proposition ever could.

[30:08] metaphors open the possibility for a deep personal experience of and commitment to a belief. To see something rightly, to see something well, is evidence of insight.

And that can never occur outside of our own subjective stance. So our third and final constraint is a speaker's intention. We use words to mean things, put quite simply.

That's what human language does. Communication can only occur when a speaker and a listener, an author and a reader, meet each other.

Communication and understanding entails relationship. And we see this serial comically demonstrated in Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass. Therein, Alice and Humpty Dumpty have an exchange on the process of birthday presents.

And Humpty, after noticing you only receive presents once a year, announces, there's glory for you. I don't know what you mean by glory, Alice said.

[31:17] Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. Of course you don't, till I tell you. I meant, there's a nice knockdown argument for you. But glory doesn't mean a nice knockdown argument, Alice objected.

When I use a word, Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less. Now, the philosophical question which is raised in this exchange is an interesting one.

But here it primarily demonstrates the importance of a speaker's intentions, both in what they intend to say and the means by which they go about saying it. And this might seem fairly self-evident.

But to ask about a speaker's intention is effectively to explore why did the speaker choose a metaphor in the first place? Why not just plain speech?

C.S. Lewis, in a delightful little essay entitled Blue Spells and Full Ends for Us. If you want to get some insight into why it's titled that way, read the essay.

[32:25] But it's a helpful guide in this regard. His first observation is that when we encounter something new, something outside of our experience, we require a metaphor.

And if something new is to be intelligible, it must be related to that of which we already have some knowledge. So far, so good.

Professor Lewis then makes an additional qualification. When someone knows a subject very well, inside and out, and they want to communicate it to someone who has limited experience of this new subject, he or she will need to come up with a metaphor for the pupil.

And Lewis calls these instructive metaphors, master metaphors. For the metaphor creator, who is a master in the subject under discussion, the metaphor is helpful, but limited.

They see that the metaphor can only take one so far. Their intention in using the metaphor is to teach, to introduce the pupil to something. And we observe these sorts of metaphors quite frequently in scientific discipline, where the concepts can be difficult to grasp and make sense of.

[33:35] So, scientists speak of space-time being a fabric, or of electromagnetic forces as waves, of quarks which have spin. For the master, these metaphors are limited and cannot be pressed too far, lest they result in absurdity.

So, electromagnetism can be described in wave theory, but apparently I'm not a scientist. This theory is only a model of the reality scientists observe. It has its limitations.

For the pupil in the classroom, however, these metaphors are the primary means by which to understand. The pupil is at the mercy of the master, and the metaphors the master chooses to use.

In such a situation, for the pupil to know the metaphor is to know the subject, until such time when the pupil has sufficient knowledge to recognize the limitations of the metaphor.

Which brings us back to our second constraint, personal experience. We can often grow into metaphors. So, with all of that being said, let's return to a question with which the lecture began.

[34:51] How should we read and respond to the metaphors we find in the Bible? What are the practical implications for our reading of Scripture? How are we to read the metaphors of God?

You've probably already made some personal notes yourself. Now, the first and central implication in our reading of biblical metaphor is that we are pupils, and God is our master.

In God's self-revelation in Scripture, we are at his mercy. He appears and reveals himself as he sees fit. Aristotle thought a good metaphor was a sign of genius.

As Christians, we go a step further and say that a good biblical metaphor is a sign of divine revelation. Now, metaphors, as indeed all human speech, is limited.

But this limitation is not necessarily one of imperfection, but of finitude. The metaphors of God which we find in the Bible can only be pressed so far. This, I think, and many commentators would agree with me, is why there are so many metaphors about God in the Bible.

[35:57] If God were spoken of exclusively as one particular metaphor, we would run into the danger of idolatry, of equating the verbal image with the one to whom the image points, the one who is reflected in that image.

But the sheer variety and the complexity of the metaphors of God, which we find in the Bible, combat this tendency in the human heart. And we can draw another conclusion from this.

We, as pupils, can never presume to claim an absolute, absolutizing knowledge of God. The triune God, surprise, surprise, does not fit in a box.

Any attempts to systematize him will run aground on the shoals of biblical metaphor. Now, this does not entail that we should not be systematic in our thinking. I think we should.

But it simply acknowledges the limitations of our thinking about God. Christianity is, after all, faith seeking understanding. Another implication, which I think is true generally in our reading of Scripture, but seems especially true in metaphors of God, is that we must be continually vigilant about the presuppositions we, as readers, bring to our metaphorical interpretations.

[37:16] We should always be asking, in what ways does our sinfulness or our limited rational and experiential capacities obscure and constrain the metaphors which God gives us?

If we have had poor earthly fathers, we may well struggle with understanding God as Father. If we have not spent time in the Old Testament, we will have tremendous difficulty understanding the metaphors which Christ fulfills.

We might be comfortable with the metaphor of God as refuge, but do we also confess the metaphor of God as warrior? Now, the surest antidote to these dangerous tendencies is time spent searching through and meditating on the Scriptures, as well as a commitment to reading Scripture as the Church, in order that our own personal interpretation can be weighed and discussed with brothers and sisters, both living and dead.

Within Scripture, contextual constraints become immediately apparent, as we already saw in the example of the cursed fig tree. It is the entirety of scriptural revelation which speaks of God, and it is only within the whole that we can rightly make sense of the parts.

Good reading of biblical metaphor requires us to be well acquainted with the entire breadth and depth of scriptural imagery. So when we speak of the first person of the Trinity as Father, when we speak of God as the rock, the refuge, as the Good Shepherd, we are entering into some very deep and enriching currents of biblical metaphor.

[38:57] The second half of this lecture's title was Poetic Imagination in the Bible, and we haven't talked about that much. If I had heard that in a previous life, I would be thinking about airy nonsense and romantic escapism, as though imagination only dealt with things of inconsequence.

But I think at this point I've made it fairly clear that this is both inaccurate and unhelpful. Because metaphors are concerned with insight, because they change the way in which we see the world, metaphors have the potential to be transformative, to provide the seedbed from which all of our thinking grows.

So sports psychologists, for example, often tell athletes under their care to envision the outcome. A simple example of imagination in action.

Now C.S. Lewis, in the aforementioned essay, puts it this way. In speaking of metaphors, we are not talking of truth, but of meaning. Meaning, meaning which is the antecedent condition, both of truth and falsehood, whose antithesis is not error, but utter nonsense.

And with his prescient comment, Lewis seems to be striking at the very heart of the late modern condition, where we no longer even discuss truth or falsity, because it's all nonsense.

[40:26] We don't have the correct orienting metaphors. For to imagine is to see meaning in the world.

Lewis's mentor, George MacDonald, in his book, A Dish of Oorts, puts it this way. We yield you your facts, the laws, we claim for the prophetic imagination, by which he meant the duty of human imagination was, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to pursue the divine imagination, to contemplate the works of his hands and the metaphors of his scripture.

Christian poetic imagination, then, is nothing less than submission of the whole human person, heart, soul, mind, and strength to the purposes of the triune God.

Now, so much more could be said, but I wanted to give ample time for questions. So, I'll simply close this lecture with a prayer from Psalm 27.

And there, David reveals something of why God considered him a man after his own heart. Because in this prayer, the one thing which David asks of the Lord is to dwell in his temple and to gaze upon his beauty, to be utterly enraptured, by the presence of the Lord.

[41:53] May this be true of us as well. So, Psalm 27. The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries, and my foes, it is they who stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear. Though war arise against me, yet I will be confident. One thing I have asked of the Lord that I will seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.

For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble. He will conceal me under the cover of his tent. He will lift me high upon a rock. And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy.

I will sing and make melody to the Lord. Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud. Be gracious to me and answer me. You have said, Seek my face. My heart says to you, Your face, Lord, do I seek.

[43:10] Hide not your face from me. Turn not your servant away in anger. O you who have been my help, cast me not off. Forsake me not, O God of my salvation.

For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the Lord will take me in. Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies. Give me not up to the will of my adversary, for false witnesses have risen against me and they breathe out violence.

I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord, be strong, and let your heart take courage. Wait for the Lord.

Amen. So. With all of that said, I would imagine you have some questions, and we have still a fair bit of time if that clock is accurate, so fire away.

Questions or comments? Yes. Wow. This is fascinating. It really is.

[44:27] And, of course, you know, our lives are filled with metaphor. I mean, idiomatic speech is very often metaphoric, and we live and breathe on that.

I think many of the metaphors in the Bible deal with things that are very difficult for us to touch. Emotions, for instance. Love.

How do you describe love? My love is a red, red rose, one of the Scottish poets would say. We can't hang on to it without something a little more concrete than that, because it's just too big an idea for us to encompass.

You could say the same thing about forgiveness. I think metaphors are especially helpful with regard to emotional content, but you've described so many other uses of it that I wouldn't stop.

with that. And I like the way metaphor expands our understanding of the actual word or situation.

[45:36] Some of the things that perplexed me about applying metaphor to the Bible, and I've run across people who believe in the literal truth of the Bible, and oh boy, are we in difficulty with that.

is that metaphor can be interpreted in many cases in different ways. And so we have some people that do expand the meaning that we are seeking, and others that take off in directions that are really quite fanciful and not helpful and not helpful at all.

Could you comment on that when we're interpreting metaphor? Yeah. Yeah, of course. Thanks for that feedback and for that question. So, I suppose the first thing I would say would be that we perceive the intention of a metaphor from what we know about the speaker.

So all metaphors that we receive in Scripture need to be read amongst all the other metaphors, or else one of them becomes kind of absolute and we see God only in that way.

So it's important to read canonically, and that will certainly guide how we should understand a metaphor. another important guide would be the tradition of the church.

[47:16] So apostolicity would say that the invisible God became flesh in Jesus Christ so that it was no longer a shapeless word.

It was a living word, a word enfleshed. And that's passed on to the church. So when we read as brothers and sisters, we kind of keep each other in check.

I think would be another qualification. So if we have an understanding of a metaphor of God which has never before been thought of in the church, we ought to be fairly careful about admitting whether or not it is a fitting interpretation.

but I suppose the last thing that could be said is that metaphors can be explicated for what they mean.

And as we kind of spell out, then we're talking about logical propositions, statements of truth or falsity, which can be brought to bear in an intellectual way against what we encounter in the world.

[48:59] So that would be another way to kind of test our metaphors of God is do they accord with the statements which we take to be true about God.

So the imagination is never untethered from our thinking, from our intellect, but they interact with each other. Is that helpful?

people? That's very good. The other thing I like about metaphors is that many of them humanize a concept that really can be fairly remote. You know, there was no prodigal son.

He doesn't exist. But that story is so much more alive and approachable than saying, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us, you know, which we also believe.

I mean, there's the pricing, if you will, of the whole, of the prodigal son, and the humanizing of difficult concepts, I think, is one of the blessings that Jesus gave us.

[50:04] Yeah. I agree. Yes? In your reading around this, did you see much discussion of the way in which the fairly concrete language of the concrete Hebrew, of the earliest parts of the Old Testament, these concrete elements got combined to create more abstract concepts?

Not specifically, although I do sort of know what you're referring to. because Mesopotamian religion was very concrete and less abstract, and the Hellenic world was much more abstract and concrete.

So there's certainly a tension there. But the God of Scripture has always been a God who acts in history, and yet who is outside of history, and Christ is both man and God.

So I think that... Sorry, I was just saying, I was just thinking of feral children who are raised by animals and have a chance to develop language at that crucial time.

time. It seems that to be able to think abstractly, we need these sort of concrete building blocks. Oh, I see. Yes, that's true.

[51:47] Cognitive science and cognitive linguists have basically put forward that argument to say that in order for human cognition to occur, we need kind of a bedrock of fundamental experiences that are concrete, and from that we can build a network of more abstract ideas.

So in some sense, our loftiest thinking rests on a bed of the very tangible. tangible. Yeah. But I don't know if I could say more concretely about that because I haven't done much reading on that particular topic.

Following on that, an interesting thing then would be when you can actually, by the common human experience cross culturally, you could perhaps have a metaphor that will open communication between people who have different experience and people, you know, the idea that Jean Vanier has the simplicity of what people we would call mentally incapacitated or whatever, that they can still understand something quite deep in metaphor that will transfer.

That's what's so moving to some of us when we see somebody who gets the concept. There's a commonality universally in understanding that can translate a concept that's very big that even a stupid person can get or, you know, or so-called lesser person can get.

Yeah. There's something beyond just this linear building block kind of thing that seems to relate to actual truth.

[53:47] Right. Yeah. It's very exciting to me that idea. Yeah. Anyway, that's not really a question. No, that's a good comment. Thank you. This is a question. Yes, Harvey.

Are these, from your reading of your study, I'm so impressed with your presentation, are these equivalents? In the beginning was the word. How about, in the beginning was metaphor?

I suspect that they're conceptually equivalent, but what would you think? Uh, I would say, my understanding of an archa ha logos is that logos refers to the divine word before he was enfleshed as the son who was eternally with the father.

And he, he, I guess, exegetes or metaphors the father to us, but I don't know if one could say the son is a, yeah, I don't know if one could say that, um, or if he is, he's the perfect metaphor, around which all other metaphors orient themselves.

That seems to be true. Don't, don't both, both of, appeal, openly to trust. We are, we either believe we're given an inner creation and we trust this givenness of the world and our speech about it.

[55:38] Yeah. Or, as children of the enlightenment, we try to produce a freestanding language which maps the world exhaustively. Yeah. Therefore, we don't need trust.

Yeah. That's the battle, I think, hidden behind this crisis discussion. Yeah. Can we trust language? Yeah. Totally. Yeah, that's a very good insight.

And Bart would say, only because of Christ. Yeah. Which I think I would agree with him. Yes?

You know, some, some philosophers ask the question, why is there something rather than nothing? And a similar question would be, why does anything mean anything? you know, why, why, how can anything mean something else?

What is that? And in the beginning, there was the word, it was always striking me as singing to talk about meaning. And somehow behind that meaning intention, you know, God's ongoing intention that we didn't exist, had to be in the beginning.

[56:43] Yeah. I think that's also true because contingent speech only makes sense ultimately within the context of the transcendent reality, which we would say is God.

So there's a givenness to all of our speech which is contingent on the fact that we believe there is an ultimate reality and it's a person.

Yeah. Not just a molecule. Not just a molecule. Yeah. Yes, Whitney. Maybe a silly thing.

Do you know of any, I just think of metaphors like thematic, so wondering in the Bible, do you know of any sort of overall what metaphors are used?

like agricultural or... Oh, do I have like a list? Yeah, or any interesting insights of like in any particular place in the Bible where there's more one kind of, one sort of theme of metaphors than another?

[57:59] Or overall? I hadn't thought of that. IVP, InterVarsity Press, has put out an excellent dictionary of biblical imagery. and there they go through fairly exhaustively, not just within the context of speech about God, but metaphor in the Bible in general.

And I think even based on the length of entries you can often tell how central a particular metaphor is to biblical modes of thinking. meaning. But experientially, I would say at the very core of Christian vocabulary we have metaphors of God that are just so prevalent that we often don't even think about it.

And those are kind of the guiding metaphors within the entire canon. But I don't have any specific comments about, say, for example, in certain moments in Israel's history where one metaphor becomes the most important and in other areas not.

It seems that, at least in the Old Testament where I've been spending most of my time in the Psalter, is that you get metaphors piled upon metaphors because the psalmist is trying to describe the glory of God.

And a single metaphor certainly will not suffice. Yeah. Can I have something? to correct me if I'm wrong?

[59:33] When I read the Bible and I read those metaphors, especially in the New Testament about Jesus' teaching, I found that Jesus is a great teacher because he knows his audience.

Bible and he used the Bible Bible Bible to help those audiences to understand the seeds, different seeds of the story.

Because those people grow things and immediately those audiences can understand. Nowadays, we try to, when we make conversation or presentation, we first want to know who our audiences are.

And then we try to avoid the technical jargon. For example, some time ago I worked in the personal retail banking and gave mortgages to clients.

and if you say, oh, this is the rate, how much I pay, and they just look at each other like that. Then I said, well, by this certain age, when you're 60 years old, your mortgage will be pay out and your monthly payment.

[60:44] Then they really understand it. So it's like you kind of dive into the world to try to avoid your jargon and explain these things to your audience.

That's what I feel. And one thing is, one day my colleague was challenging me, he said, Elizabeth, what is the 10th commandment? And I said, oh, thou shalt not cover your neighbor's wife, your neighbor's servants, and neighbor's cow.

Then he asked me, Elizabeth, do you have servants? Do you have cow? I said, thou shalt not cover your iPhone.

So it's kind of things, we kind of connect the old history, connect the modern life, that make people to understand. That's what I think metaphor is for.

Yeah, there's always a personal dimension to understanding metaphor, which is why they really, when we get it, then we really get it. Yeah. Any other questions?

[61:51] things? Well, if that brings us to an end, then perhaps, Dr. Packer, you have some final words to say to conclude our meeting.

Well, I've nothing to add to what you've said to us, Jill. That's my first comment. I think you opened the door, if I can put it this way, into a fascinating garden, actually.

Gardens in which flower after flower appears, they're close to each other, and there were so many flowers growing in the garden that you can't actually take them in all at once.

That seems to me to be the metaphor, you can't manage without metaphors, you can't communicate without metaphors, because, well, I'm sorry, I was saying, and I must get back to what I was saying, I was saying that is itself a metaphor for the way in which metaphors enrich our understanding, our grasp of the meaning of the life, I have to say, I think, the community life of which we are part.

We understand each other better, we understand the world better, because of the pictures that we use to do, shall I say, the garden job, of enriching our vision and making us aware, I do think, now I do think this bit is important, making us aware that there's always more, more reality to be grasped, to be focused, to be thought about, to be related to other realities, than we had appreciated up to this point.

[64:17] In other words, metaphor ultimately stems from God's desire to enrich the life that he's creating, human life, and there are no limits that we can set in advance to how much enrichment particular metaphors can bring once you allow yourself to focus on it.

Which thought, in turn, takes me back to the humbler notion, that we, all of us, should be always learning, and learning about the richness, ingenuity, wisdom, and so forth, of God.

And this is a process which will never stop. Well, why should it? God is infinite, and the future that he set before us, the future of learning one thing after another, relating in one way after another, enriching our fellowship with other people, as well as our fellowship with God himself.

That goes on and on and on. Without metaphor, I don't see how it could, although, of course, I don't have to add immediately, but then what I can see isn't necessarily, isn't, that may not be at all any indication of the limits that God has set himself.

but I think that the wise thought to take away from the line of thought that Joel has opened for us is never suppose that in knowledge of God and life with God, you know it all, you've seen it all, you've tasted it all, there's always more to come and the Lord has glory, sort of divine glory, the expanded awareness of marvelous things that inhere in God, it's that kind of glory that we keep moving through and on with and never stop appreciating it.

[67:24] Now, amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. And it takes us right to the end of our time and therefore there is one thing that I know, one further thing is I should say, that that is brothers and sisters, it's all over, all that remains is to clear the furniture.

Peace.