The Power of Biblical Metaphor in the Face of Death

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In the face of death, Christian people turn to the Bible for words of comfort, hope, and promise rooted in the eternal love of God, for the Bible—the living word of God—empowers the church's Spirit-led witness in the world. Enabled by and through the word of God, the church stares into death's eye, trusting, as the Apostle Paul proclaims, that "death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor 15:54). The courage and conviction of the Christian community to face down death come to us through the word of God and, more often than not, the words we turn to in Scripture at the time of death are words steeped in metaphor.

Think about the last funeral you attended as part of the assembled body of Christ. Can you recall what Scripture texts were read as words of comfort to the bereaved? Or which biblical texts shaped the liturgical pattern providing hope to the gathered? How was God's promise of eternal love woven into the prayers and songs of the community of the faithful? If you remember any word of God spoken, prayed, or sung in the face of death, I suspect the word you recall is a biblical metaphor or a matrix of metaphors. Likely biblical metaphors flung in the face of death include:

- the city of God in Revelation 21
- Ecclesiastes 3 and time's seasons
- Romans 6 and our dying and rising with Christ in the baptismal waters

In the face of death, God's people and Christian pastors turn to the Bible, often to a relatively small group of texts (a "canon within the canon") that use rich metaphors to redescribe the reality of the people gathered for the funeral service.

- the dwelling places of John 14
- Psalm 121's hills that bring God's help
- the bright, crystal river of life in Revelation 22
- and, of course, Psalm 23 and our shepherding God.

The church turns to these and other biblical metaphors in the face of death, because metaphors have power. The efficacy of biblical metaphor to create faith and sustain the faithful is evident in the Bible's constant use of metaphoric language and through the church's employment of metaphors in times of trial.

REALITY ROOTED IN METAPHOR[1]

Without question, the biblical narrative is rife with metaphor. Why? Metaphors provide a way by which we can speak human words about the divine reality of God. In many ways, it is a nonsensical endeavor: How dare we assume we have the ability to say anything true about God? But what choice is there? All we have is our human speech in its various forms, be it written, spoken, or sung. Liturgical scholar Gail Ramshaw names this tension in our language about God and calls for a "Yes-No-Yes" hermeneutical method for the study of liturgy. She describes this method in the following way:

> We say Yes to liturgical language…we affirm its truth and its meaning for our lives, devoutly responding with a Yes. But…our liturgical language is mere human language…our words are pitifully meager: step two is a disillusioned No. But our sacred speech is the language of faith, our tradition of grace. We are the community that continues to receive God's life through these words.…Step three is our faithful response to the admittedly hidden God, a hearty Yes to the sacred speech given us.[2]

I believe the same can be said for biblical language as well; after all, the sacred speech of our liturgy is birthed from the sacred speech of Scripture. The Yes-No-Yes hermeneutic alive in the community's liturgy is appropriated from the biblical tradition by and through metaphor.

Metaphors, as philosopher Paul Ricoeur aptly asserts, have "the power to 'redescribe' reality."[3] Through his work, Ricoeur rescues metaphor from the misconception that it is purely a decorative figure of speech. He recognizes that metaphoric language has the ability to create new meaning and alter reality through its utterance. The metaphorical utterance has redescriptive power because its tension "is really not something that occurs between two terms in the utterance, but rather

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[1]The genesis of my work on metaphor—and on this section in particular—was through my Doctor of Ministry project at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, entitled, "Biblical Metaphor in Worshiping Communities." In my doctoral project, I stressed the importance of the church's appropriation of inclusive biblical metaphors. In this article, my goal is to elucidate the power and persistence of biblical metaphors in funerals.

[2]Gail Ramshaw, *Reviving Sacred Speech: The Meaning of Liturgical Language: Second Thoughts on Christ in Sacred Speech* (Akron, OH: Order of Saint Luke Publications, 2000) 13.

[3]Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977) 6.

between two opposed interpretations of the utterance."[4] The clash of conflicting interpretations, or, in Ramshaw's words, the Yes-No of our sacred speech, results in an absurd yet true Yes. Our speech about God through our metaphorical utterances in Scripture and the liturgy enables us to use "pitifully meager" human words and "redescribe" our new reality in God.

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The stark reality of death, however, quickly exposes the meagerness of our words; nevertheless, the biblical witness buoys the faithful through its metaphorical utterances shaping our newly described reality in the promises of God. Week after week, the liturgy grounds the people of God in biblical metaphor so that when death strikes, we have our sacred speech to sustain and save us. Amy Plantinga Pauw states it this way: "The Christian practices surrounding the passage of death echo the regular rhythms of worship and fellowship in the Christian life."[5] Because the Bible is the basis for faith and life in Christian worship, the biblical metaphors are encountered and experienced in the rhythm of our liturgical practices. Ramshaw makes this point clear by asserting, "All our essential metaphors [in liturgical language] are found in Scripture."[6]

The metaphorical utterances practiced in community, then, build upon each other through exposure and expansion in the imagination of the people of God. Ricoeur calls this an "array of intersignifications"[7] whereby one metaphor relies upon a matrix of metaphors to create meaning and remain relevant. Ricoeur explains further using the lens of Scripture:

> One metaphor, in effect, calls for another and each one stays alive by conserving its power to evoke the whole network. Thus within the Hebraic traditions God is called King, Father, Husband, Lord, Shepherd, and Judge, as well as Rock, Fortress, Redeemer, and Suffering Servant. The network engenders what we call root metaphors…they have the ability to engender…an unlimited number of potential interpretations.[8]

Metaphors not only give us a hermeneutic to speak about God, they provide a fecund matrix of meaning-making potential that centers our reality in God. This is certainly true in the rhythm of weekly worship in the Christian community; yet,

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[4]Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976) 50.

[5]Amy Plantinga Pauw, "Dying Well," in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997) 177.

[6]Ramshaw, *Reviving Sacred Speech*, 22.

[7]Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 64.

[8]Ibid.

the consistent utterance of biblical metaphors in the face of death reveals the sustaining and efficacious power they have for the people of God. At the time of a funeral, reality for God's people is "resdescribed" through sacred speech rooted in biblical metaphor—a reality that breathes life into the sullen visage of death.

AT THE FOREFRONT OF DEATH

To check my own assumption that biblical texts rich with metaphor are the main scriptural passages proclaimed, prayed, and put into practice at Christian funerals, I enlisted the insight and experience of others who, week after week, put themselves at the forefront of death: pastors and priests who preside at funerals.

In the spring of 2013, I conducted a brief ten-question survey of 85 leaders in the church who provide guidance to families and communities of faith at the time of death. The respondents, all clergy, were from primarily mainline Protestant denominations in the United States.[9] The goal of my survey was to examine which biblical texts were often used as sacred speech in the worship life of Christian communities. To achieve this goal, I asked two open-ended questions: first, What are the three main biblical texts you tend to preach from at funerals or memorials? And second, What three biblical texts are most often cited in the funeral or memorial liturgy you use? The responses I received from these two questions reveal an abiding allegiance to biblical metaphors in the face of death.

When asked "What are the three main biblical texts you tend to preach from at funerals?" priests and pastors surveyed gave a handful of biblical texts the lion's share of attention. Even though some respondents failed to answer the question altogether and some only listed one or two passages, 205 biblical texts were cited by 81 respondents, with six receiving an overwhelming majority (the total count for each passage is in parentheses): John 14 (47), Rom 8 (31), Ps 23 (28), Eccl 3 (15), Rev 21 (13), and John 11(12). The total count for all six passages was 146, or 71% of the biblical texts cited. What does this mean? Two details are worth our attention.

First, the respondents were not given a list of biblical texts to choose from in their answers. Each person, without prompting, recorded the biblical texts most prevalent in their own proclamation at funerals. I find it remarkable that over 70% of the responses of the 81 respondents selected six primary texts. Admittedly this is a small sampling of clergy, yet I believe the emerging evidence from this survey points to a narrow "canon within a canon" for preachers at funerals. What is more, these six biblical passages are all deeply metaphoric. The biblical metaphors in John 14, Rom 8, and Ps 23 will be discussed further in the section below. They, along with Jesus' metaphorical claim to be the resurrection and the life in John 11,

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[9]The respondents of the SurveyMonkey include 43 women and 42 men with the following denominational affiliations: 42 Lutheran, 19 Methodist, 9 Presbyterian, 7 Episcopalian, 4 Mennonite, 1 Moravian, 1 Catholic, 1 Assemblies of God, and 1 United Church of Christ. The survey can be viewed at http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/KVWZGZM (accessed November 1, 2013).

John of Patmos's metaphoric vision of a holy city in Rev 21, and Qoheleth's time metaphor in Eccl 3, reveal the pervasiveness of biblical metaphors proclaimed to Christian communities dealing with death.

It is not surprising, then, that the second question regarding biblical texts in the funeral liturgy yielded similar results, namely, texts abounding in metaphor. In fact, the top six biblical passages cited in funeral or memorial liturgies by the 76 respondents to this question are similar to the preaching texts with two exceptions: 1 Cor 15 and Rom 6. With 190 total texts cited by 76 respondents to this question, the list of six is as follows (again, the total count is in parentheses): Ps 23 (41), Rom 8 (34), John 14 (21), 1 Cor 15 (11), John 11 (10), and Rom 6 (10). The total count for all six passages was 127, or 67% of the biblical texts cited.

> *"Christians have assembled a kind of 'canon within the canon' for interpretations of death"*

In this list, the Pauline metaphors of death being "swallowed up" and the "last trumpet" sounding with Christ's victory (1 Cor 15) as well as our "being buried with Jesus by baptism" (Rom 6), are added to those in the responses to my first question. The consistency of responses here points again to a growing canon of biblical texts cited at funerals. Melinda Quivik agrees. She writes, "Some of the most persistent texts [at funerals] have been Romans 6 and 8, 1 Corinthians 15, Revelation 7 and 21, Psalms 23, 46, 65, and 121."[10] She goes on to say exactly what I believe this brief survey of those at the forefront of death begins to show: "Christians have assembled a kind of 'canon within the canon' for interpretations of death."[11] I believe this canon helps the Christian people face death while leaning heavily on the power of biblical metaphors to "redescribe" our reality in Christ.

FUNERALS AND THE BIBLICAL WITNESS: A METAPHORIC MATRIX

Biblical metaphors are persistently present at funerals. The biblical texts that often shape our sacred speech within the framework of the funeral liturgy exhibit our tendency to rely on metaphorical language to sustain and save us. By their frequent use during funerals, metaphors have demonstrated the church's reliance on their power to "transform us and our perception of and vision for the world."[12] Not only that, the canon-like presence of metaphoric utterances in the face of death shows that a matrix of metaphors shape the worshiping body of Christ, creating a "concrete form through the patterned life of the Christian community, molding the way we live as well as the way we die."[13]

[10]Melinda Quivik, *A Christian Funeral: Witness to the Resurrection* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005) 73.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ramshaw, *Reviving Sacred Speech*, 13.

[13]Plantinga Pauw, "Dying Well," 164.

My survey of 85 priests and pastors revealed three biblical passages incredibly influential in funeral liturgies and sermons: Ps 23, John 14, and Rom 8. Nearly 100% of clergy surveyed cited at least one of these three specific passages as either a preaching text or a text used within the context of worship. Each of these three biblical texts is steeped in metaphor, but, more than that, there is, as Ricoeur described, "an array of intersignifications" connecting the passages together. In other words, Ps 23, John 14, and Rom 8, though uniquely different scriptural texts and genres, are held together not only by their popularity of use in funerals, but more significantly through a matrix of shared metaphors that are able to evoke meaning, thereby grounding our reality—despite the presence of death—in the eternal life of Christ Jesus.

Psalm 23 is arguably the most familiar metaphor in Scripture. "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want" (Ps 23:1). From the opening verse, the psalmist "redescribes" reality through the "pitifully meager" image of a shepherd. Long have these words of promise assured God's people who "walk through the darkest valley." The metaphor builds upon itself, casting a vision of our tender shepherding God leading us sheep to the "green pastures" and "still waters" that provide restoration and life. The comfort and care of the shepherd culminates in the oft-memorized verse, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long" (23:6). The root metaphor of the shepherd engenders a dwelling in the Lord's presence despite the dark valley of death that threatens our security.[14] Such a powerful reality uttered in Ps 23 is undeniably potent in the face of death.

In John 14, Jesus begins his "Farewell Discourse." The words of Jesus most often cited within the context of the funeral are the opening verses of the chapter:

> Do not let your heart be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. (John 14:1–3)

As Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure, he uses the metaphor of "house" and "dwelling place" to communicate an enduring relationship beyond the scope of the present hour. Without question, these are comforting words as the shadow of death and departure looms before those who follow Jesus. The metaphors Jesus uses in John 14 clearly connect to Ps 23. To "dwell in the house of the Lord" (Ps 23) shares meaning with the "Father's house" where there are "many dwelling places" (John 14). Not only that, the table "prepared before me in the presence of my enemies" is echoed by Jesus' promise to "prepare a place for you." Though Jesus does not apply the root metaphor of the shepherd itself in these verses (though he explicitly does in John 10), the metaphors of Ps 23 and John 14 are connected by their matrix of meta-

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[14]Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 64. In this statement I am applying Ricoeur's terminology to the metaphor at work in Ps 23.

phoric utterances. This is especially true when these texts are used in the context of a funeral.

So, what shall we say of Rom 8? Admittedly, the metaphors in this text are not as directly connected as are the images in Ps 23 and John 14; nevertheless, I contend that the matrix of shared metaphors is present also in Rom 8. The verses of Rom 8 that get the most attention at funerals are 31–39. Here, Paul is attempting to describe the power of God's love in Christ to the church in Rome. He asks, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" (v. 35a). This is a fair question at work in the hearts of funeral mourners clearly separated from a loved one by death.

As he proceeds with his argument, Paul quotes Ps 44:22. In doing so, he vividly names the feeling of despair felt by the church in the midst of immediate peril: "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." Here, the sheep-shepherd metaphoric language is summoned but turned on its head. To be sheep may not be so calm and comforting (Ps 23, John 14) when the shepherd is not present.

Paul declares an emphatic no to his rhetorical question. No, we are more than slaughtered sheep—we are God's! So that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38–39). In other words, the sheep will always have a place—a home—centered in the love of the Good Shepherd, Christ Jesus. The sheep-shepherding metaphor, though reinterpreted by Paul, in the end still holds firm for the people of God. Our reality is the biblical witness that God's love is eternal, and death cannot separate us from this reality. The biblical metaphors at work in Rom 8, John 14, and Ps 23 provide meaning in ways that cannot be experienced otherwise.

Biblical metaphors have power. Often Christian funeral liturgies rely on this power during the commendation of the deceased by utilizing the metaphoric matrix at work in Rom 8, John 14, and Ps 23. For in the face of death, the church proclaims,

> Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant __*name*__ . Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive *him/her* into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light.[15] ⊕

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[15]*Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Occasional Services for the Assembly* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009) 327.