

Subtext

“They (that is the Seraphs) cried out to one another and said: / ‘Holy, holy, holy is *Yahweh*, God, the omnipotent; / the whole earth is full with the glory of God.” — Isaiah 6:3.

I have, perhaps too often for some, mentioned my involvement with professional theater. What I am about to say concerning that involvement I have often said in private. I have not, however, mentioned this (or at least I do not remember mentioning this) from the pulpit. (Slight pause.)

While I was still in my early twenties I attended acting classes at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, a well known training ground for professional actors. In no particular order among those who have attended the American Academy over many years are Lauren Bacall, Anne Hathaway, Kim Cattrall, Anne Bancroft, Danny DeVito , Robert Redford.

There are hundreds of other attendees whose names you might recognize. My only reason to mention these few is to reiterate this is a training ground for professionals.

I now can hear you say, “But Joe, you were and are a writer, not an actor. Why did you attend classes at the American Academy?”

My reason for wanting to go there, study acting, is simple. I wanted to know what actors know about doing their job.

My premise was, if I knew how actors went about their work I, therefore, would know what I needed to know to better communicate with actors and write for actors. So, how *do* actors work?

I suppose this next statement is flattering to we who are writers. Actors learn they first have to work with the text, work with what is written. But there is something beyond the text, something more they need to do.

You see, no matter how good the writing is— and this next statement is not particularly flattering to we who are writers— no matter how good the writing, the text still just sits on the page. To be blunt, words— anyone’s words from Shakespeare to Shaw to Connolly— words on a page are somewhat dry, dead.

It is an actor who breathes life into the words, makes words leap off the page, fully vibrant, finds the emotions which lie therein. This is what enables the text to resonate with the audience. Hence, the next question is ‘how do actors do that?’

Actors work with what theater people call subtext. Subtext is content not announced explicitly by the words, by the characters, by the author.

This content and context is or should be implicit. Hence, it is the job of the actor to help the audience understand what is implicit in that text.

Now, I personally think it’s nearly impossible to plumb the depth of emotions with mere words. Therefore, an actor’s job is to convey what is *not* explicit, not literally spelled out.

You see, there are many levels to emotion and a word is simply that: a word. You can use all kinds of words to express emotion, for instance ‘joy’ or ‘anger’ or ‘hope.’ But think of how many levels can be found in each of those words, ‘joy’ or ‘anger’ or ‘hope.’ The writer can only imply what levels those emotions might reach.

The actor strives to help an audience grasp various levels, the heights and depths of these emotions. In attempting to convey those emotions an actor tries to communicate through attitude or posture or facial expression, tries to convey something about the underlying thoughts, motives, desires of a character.

We also need to realize subtext is not hidden. It exists right there in the words, if the actor is well studied at trying to transmit the meanings found therein. (Slight pause.)

These words are recorded in the Scroll of the Prophet Isaiah: “They (that is the Seraphs) cried out to one another and said: / ‘Holy, holy, holy is *Yahweh*, God, the omnipotent; / the whole earth is full with the glory of God.’” (Slight pause.)

Here is another piece of my personal history you have heard, perhaps too often for some. I grew up in the Roman Catholic tradition. Hence I am quite familiar with these words from Isaiah.

The *Sanctus* in the Roman Mass quotes this passage. The Communion service we use here, in this church, quotes this passage. “Holy, Holy, Holy God...”

That is the simply the text. One might even say it is obvious, clear, nearly meant to be taken literally. But what is the subtext? What is underneath, hidden in the words?

That is a question we need to ask nearly every passage in Scripture: what is the subtext? Indeed, we should only rarely ask what the text literally says. Rather, we should ask ‘what does it mean?’ ‘What is the subtext telling us?’

So I’m suggesting, when it comes to Scripture, we need to work with the subtext. Like an actor works with subtext discovering emotional content— what that is, what that feels like— we need to do the same kind of work with subtext in Scripture. Why? We need to try to uncover the depth of the emotional content of the text.

So, what is the subtext here? Maybe we should we start where actors start: with the words, with the text, with what is written.

What does the word “holy” mean? Holy means worthy of respect, devotion, inspiring awe, reverence. That makes sense. After all, this is about God.

That brings me to the next word to be considered, perhaps the pivotal word in this passage: glory. The underlying Hebrew word is *kabod*. As is true of many Hebrew words, *kabod* has multiple meanings. And often meaning depends on the context.

In this context *kabod*— glory— means the overwhelming presence of God and the reality of the goodness of God, the love of God. In short, *kabod* informs us about the reality of the emotional presence of God.

That brings me back to the text. We can, indeed, be informed by the text if we understand the subtext. That is why actors *do* work with text. They can glean important information from it.

What I want to examine here is that seraph— that seraph touches Isaiah’s mouth with an ember, an action of purification, an eradication of guilt, corruption. But taken literally an ember on the lips sounds painful, does it not? How can that be taken in a real, literal way?

Well, that’s rather the point. What is the subtext? The subtext comes back to the word *kabod* which informs us

about the reality of the emotional presence of God.

So it is not the ember which purifies. No mere action purifies. It is God— the reality of the emotional presence of God— it is God Who purifies. (Slight pause.)

Do me a favor? Please let the emotional content of that statement sink in for a minute. It is God who purifies. That is the subtext. Yes, a writer might say an ember touched to lips brings purification. But is that what's really happening?

No. This episode is merely a way to illustrate what a story means. The reality of the story, if you would the subtext of the story says God alone, God Who is holy, purifies. (Slight pause.)

That brings me back to the *Sanctus*, this use of the words from the Prophet Isaiah in the Roman Mass, words used when we celebrate the Sacrament of Communion here. Why use Isaiah there, in that place, in what to some is the most sacred of rituals? What does it mean that we use these words as Communion is celebrated? (Slight pause.)

These words are there because of what the subtext says. God purifies. God purifies around the table.

The overwhelming presence of God, the love of God, should rivet our emotional attention when we experience the Sacrament. And unless we know the subtext we do not even know this is about emotions— our emotional attachment to God and the emotional attachment of God to humanity.

There is another item to add. The passage offered this morning ends with the words “Here am I; send me!” Why? *That* is the emotional result of the subtext. God loves us so much that we respond by loving God. (Slight pause.)

I believe life, especially emotional life, is lived in the subtext. Mere words cannot fully describe our emotions. Actions, reactions, interactions— the subtext of life— this is where our life, our emotional life, is really lived. (Slight pause.)

Well, here's something else you have heard me say, perhaps too often for some. God loves us and wants to covenant with us. God invites us to love one another.

That, my friends, is the subtext of all of Scripture. That, my friends, is the subtext of life. God loves us and wants to covenant with us. God invites us to love one another.

So here's a final thing you have heard me say, perhaps too often for some. Love God. Love neighbor. Amen.

05/27/2018

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “At the very start of this service you heard it said today we celebrate Trinity Sunday. That God is One and that God is Three is the basic tenet of the faith. But that is merely a description, words. The God of our faith— creator, redeemer, sanctifier— is a loving God, is a God Who engages our emotions, a God Who engages our emotional life. And emotions cannot be defined with mere words.”

BENEDICTION: We are people of the Spirit. We are children of God bearing witness to God's love, truth, justice, equity and peace each day. And may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, and the presence of the Spirit of Christ which is real and available, keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge, love and companionship of the Holy Spirit, this day and forever more. Amen.