

Celebration

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A Comprehensive Worship Resource



Icons: Windows into God

Finding glimpses of God in unexpected places

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Columns by Mary van Balen, Joe Grant, Gabe Huck, Chris Lowney, Melissa Musick Nussbaum, Mary Kay Whitacre



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EDITOR'S CORNER

My predecessor Pat Marrin told me retirement looked good to him because as *Celebration* editor he never knew what season he was living in. After a year of editing, I fully understand that now.

As I write this column, we are undergoing extreme mid-summer heat in Kansas City while we edit and experience the imagery of the fall Sunday readings along with hints of the approaching winter.

In this issue, our authors encourage us to struggle with the Gospel message and to risk changing our perspective on life for the sake of deeper conversion.

Mary McGlone offers us this advice: "If one of Jesus' parables does not call us to conversion, we haven't yet understood it. Jesus used parables to shock people into conversion. They aren't puzzles to be understood but calls to action crafted to make us uncomfortable enough to change our ways."

Roger Karban suggests: "It's up to us to carry on God's work, to produce and achieve life, no matter in what situation we find ourselves. Those who



Denise Simeone

refuse to take the first step in that process by surfacing God effectively working in their personal life situation can expect 'others' to step in and carry out that mission, with God's blessing. By hook or by crook, life will eventually conquer death."

Mary Kay Whitacre explores the themes of October's psalms and indicates these choices: "We can live in the hope of God's healing forgiveness or harbor grudges and resentment. We can be embraced by God's love, or build protective walls. We can confidently walk with God through life's storms, or we can retreat into bitterness and anxiety. ... We can be empowered by God's strength to care for each other, or face the loneliness of self-reliance."

So, what do we do? We choose.

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Icons: Windows into God

Finding glimpses of God in unexpected places

By MARY VAN BALEN

The long-awaited moment had arrived. Having made my way to the fifth floor of Paris' Musée d'Orsay, I slowly entered a room hung with impressionistic masterpieces. Immersed in beauty, I breathed God in. People filled the room, but in that initial moment, God and I were the only ones there. Such is the power of image.

Even our ancient ancestors knew that power. Some of the earliest evidence of human beings are found in images they left behind. One of the oldest is a small, red disk painted on a rock formation in the Cave of El Castillo in Spain. Chauvet Cave in France is famous for its stunning ice age paintings of mammoths and cave bears, horses and bison, and even an owl. Handprints in Indonesian caves show that this need to create images was felt not only by localized groups in Europe but also by people migrating around the globe. Clearly, image-making is in our genes.

Images communicate something of what is seen, experienced or imagined by the artist. They also create a unique experience for each viewer, pulling them into a relationship with both the artist and the truth expressed.

The paintings in the Musée d'Orsay were windows that pulled me into an encounter with God. They compelled me to pay profound attention. Works by Monet, Manet, Sisley and other masters revealed grace that resides in what we often mistakenly see as ordinary. For me, these paintings were icons.

Icons: windows into mystery

When we think of icons, what comes to mind is usually the stylized images familiar in the Orthodox Church and often referred to as "windows into heaven." I'm using the word *icon* in a much broader way when referring to objects, physical representations or metaphors that have become windows drawing us into communion with Holy Mystery.



— Julie Lonneman

*There is no place or time
where God is not.
Holy Mystery does
not hide; to see we must
pay attention.*

Windows allow us to experience what we'd otherwise miss. Writing at my desk and never looking up, I might not realize that a thunderstorm is coming or that my neighbor is planting pansies next door. Looking through windows I can watch snow slowly erase the grime of the city or notice stars splattering a dark night sky.

While windows let us see and appreciate things that would otherwise be hidden, we must stop what we're doing and take the time to look. A quick glance is not enough to appreciate the transformation of a yard by a gentle snowfall.

For icons to become a window into Divine Presence, we must sit with them, contemplating what they reveal to us of God. There is no hurrying. Like Elijah hearing God in a whisper and then stepping to the mouth of the cave to speak with the Lord, when we recognize God, we must pause and listen, allowing ourselves to be touched by what has been given (1 Kings 19:11-19).

Scriptural imagery of God

For as long as human beings have acknowledged and worshiped supernatural deities, they have made images of them. Over time, disagreements about the wisdom, and even appropriateness of doing, so have arisen, in some cases violently. Regardless of one's position, the reality is that human beings filter experiences, physical and spiritual, through their senses. Making some sort of representations of everything — from the commonplace to the transcendent — is natural.

The images used in the Judeo-Christian tradition to describe God are familiar to many. We've heard them at liturgies and read them ourselves. God is creator and sculptor; a shield for Abram and a fire in the bush for Moses; a hanger of rainbows and sender of plagues. One of the most beloved images is the good shepherd of Psalm 23 who safely leads the sheep to green pastures. As the psalm continues, God is the Lord who welcomes us to a table overflowing with more food than we could possibly eat.

In the Christian Scriptures, we encounter Jesus who is a vulnerable infant and a precocious child drawn to temple conversations with the teachers. Luke tells us that after his surprised parents found him in the midst of these deep discussions, he returned with them to Nazareth, was obedient to them, and grew in grace and wisdom (Luke 3:44-52). I like to imagine Jesus helping his father in the carpentry shop or Mary as she went to the market or prepared food.



Jesus also used homey metaphors in his parables: God is a patient gardener nurturing a fig tree, a loving father welcoming his prodigal son, a woman looking for her lost coin who celebrates with her friends when she finds it.

These abundant images can each be an icon for us, yet no one of them alone, or even all of them together, can contain the truth of God. God transcends image.

Many metaphors

Scripture is filled with diverse images, yet the ones we hear most often in our liturgies and prayers are masculine ones: “Lord,” “King,” “Father,” “Savior.” These are good, strong icons, but we need more! Our liturgical tables should be filled to overflowing with them, groaning and creaking under the weight. An abundance of metaphors helps us recognize God within and around us as well as in others and reminds us of the diversity and inclusiveness of God.

Some people feel marginalized by the extensive use of only a few images. But there are many others they don’t hear much about, for example “womb-love.” As the late Scripture scholar and Religious of the Sacred Heart Sr. Barbara E. Bowe wrote in *Biblical Foundations of Spirituality: Touching a Finger to the Flame*, the root of many Hebrew words found throughout Scripture describing God’s mercy or compassion is *re-hem*, meaning “womb.” When Moses describes God as merciful (*raham*) in Deuteronomy 4:31, he is calling forth the image of God who is filled with womb-love for the people — the overwhelming love a mother feels for her unborn child — a pregnant God constantly nurturing and protecting the little one in the womb.

Can we sit with God images of the woman crying out in labor (Isaiah 42:14) or with the feminine Wisdom (Proverbs 8: 22-26) who was with God when the heavens and earth were made?

And what about the refugee child, Jesus, fleeing with his parents for their lives into a foreign land? This image is powerful today when many refugees die in attempts to leave places no lon-

ger safe for them and their families, desiring only to find a new place to make their home. Many reach their destination only to be turned away. How might meditating on this icon of Jesus and his family influence our response to refugees today?

Moving beyond human metaphor, we find icons of fire and living water. Jesus is a life-giving vine, a mother hen gathering her chicks, the bread of life. In her book *Wearing God: Clothing, Laughter, Fire, and Other Overlooked Ways of Meeting God*, Lauren Winner opens up the richness of non-human imagery of God found in Scripture.

While we can never completely know God, looking through many windows into the Holy Mystery stretches our narrow understandings. We need the variety found in Scripture, in writings of Church Mothers and Fathers, the mystics, poets, authors, minority theologians, artists and scientists. And, since the one God speaks to all people in our world, metaphors and images from other traditions and faiths have a place within our prayer icons, too.

Unconventional icons

No matter where we are, we can find icons. God is eager to be recognized. As the medieval theologian and mystic Meister Eckhart said, “No one could ever have found God — He gave Himself away!” There is no place or time where God is not. Holy Mystery does not hide; to see, we must pay attention.

Anything that provides a glimpse of grace can become an icon. A quick look around my office is evidence that I’m not timid about collecting them. From small Buddhist prayer flags that hang across a window (the Spirit blowing grace around the planet) to a fossilized scallop shell (God is One), they are everywhere.

These icons have become a way of prayer. Sometimes, if they’re small enough, icons can travel with us in a pocket or purse. Or we carry them in our mind’s eye where we can always sit with them and contemplate what they reveal.

Guan Yin — In my travels, I came across a stamp showing a lovely young woman, her arms too numerous to

count, standing on a lotus flower. Her Chinese name, Guan Yin, means “the one observing the cries of the world.” She is an Asian bodhisattva or one who, according to Thubten Chodron in her book *Buddhism for Beginners*, has the desire to attain enlightenment for the benefit of others. Some bodhisattvas postpone their own enlightenment in order to remain and respond to those suffering, until all have been liberated from cyclic existence. Other bodhisattvas may choose to become Buddhas. But rather than remaining solitary in their blissful state, they remain mindful of those still struggling and guide them along their path.

Guan Yin has a tower of heads emerging from her own to better hear the sounds of the suffering, eyes in her hands so she can see them, and 1,000 arms so she can minister to them. I brought stamps home with me, and each time I look at this stunning depiction of compassion, strange as it is to my Western eyes, it stirs deep reverence and awe at the infinite mercy (or womb-love) of God for the suffering people in our world.

This goddess of mercy takes different forms — female, male, or androgynous — signifying that she is beyond all gender. Now, as we face our ignorance of gender identity and see the suffering it causes to people who don’t fit into neat categories at either end of that continuum, we would do well to look through this window and remember that God transcends gender.

Beehive — A beekeeping icon for me is August Boatwright in Sue Monk Kidd’s *The Secret Life of Bees*. I’ve read it numerous times and each time found myself wanting to spend at least a week in August’s home myself. She welcomes all who come — just as they are — and they come wounded and hurting. She gives them love and time to do the work of healing. Through her I’ve seen God’s embrace of those on the margins, God’s patience and transforming love. This icon helps me accept and be patient not only with others, but also with myself, which is the most difficult to do.

Scallop shell — I’m drawn to the ocean, an icon that opens a window for me into God’s timeless mystery, power



and constant presence. Besides being an icon itself, it drops others at my feet. The scallop shell is particularly meaningful. “God is One. God is the God of all,” it says. Once identified with the famous Camino de Santiago pilgrimage, the shell symbolizes all pilgrims. No matter where you place your finger around the outer edge of the scallop, following a ridge downward, you end up at the same point. All are pilgrims journeying to the One. I use the scallop as the name of my spiritual blog, reminding me that every day is a pilgrimage and every experience is a potential window into God.

Battered shell—Decades ago I found a broken whelk, bleached white and broken from its long journey in the sea and along sandy beaches. Over the years, I’ve moved it from home to home. Every time I look at it, it leads me into awareness of God’s faithfulness and care. No matter how broken or imperfect we are, we are treasured by the Infinite.

Dimension — Fresh from reading *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* by Edwin Abbot Abbot, my daughter engaged me in a conversation about how three-dimensional objects would look if they entered a two-dimensional world. “You’d see a square. That’s it,” she said. “The cube wouldn’t lose its third dimension, you just wouldn’t see it.” We played with the idea of a four- or five-dimensional object trying to squeeze into our three-dimensional space.

The idea took a spiritual turn for me with imagining God of infinite dimensions entering our world. It became an unlikely icon of limitless Mystery who has chosen to inhabit creation.

Circle dance — I’m not much of a dancer, but I do join in at weddings and festivals. A circle dance includes everyone, young and old. No partner required. You hold hands and move together to the music, sometimes adding a whoop or hard stomp on the floor. As Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr reminds us in his book *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation*, the fourth century Cappadocian Fathers used the circle dance—*perichoresis*—as an image of



Every day is a pilgrimage and every experience is a potential window into God.

the Trinity. God is relational, inviting us in. God is moving through creation and taking us along.

The atom — Throughout her book, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*, author Madeleine L’Engle credits scientists’ passionate questioning and openness to new understandings with deepening both her faith and her writing. In that book, she says that during the year before writing her Newbery Medal-winning *A Wrinkle in Time*, she had been reading the works of great mathematicians and physicists. It was there that she discovered theological insights she hadn’t found in reading theology. Allowing new discoveries to stir us to question and wonder is not threatening to faith. It is necessary. L’Engle asserts: “We must constantly be open to new revelation, which is another way of hearing God, with loving obedience.”

Physicists continue to look far out and deep in, asking questions and searching to learn more about the universe. What physics teaches us is that all the elements of the universe, from the astronomic to the subatomic, interrelate. Atoms, with their particles and energy levels held in perfect balance by fundamental forces, have become symbols for me of the relatedness of all things and an icon of the ever-unfolding mystery of God.

Orion — When living through difficult times, I often step out onto the side porch of my house and scan the sky looking for the constellation Orion. Finding it, I feel protected. The

celestial mythical hunter is an icon for me that points to God, ever watchful, ever present.

Icons or idols

We tend to make God in our own image. Eighteenth century philosopher Montesquieu said that if triangles had a god, they would give him three sides! A plethora of images and metaphors guards against the idolatry of believing that a particular image is *the true* image, somehow capturing the essence of God. Icons can become idols when we forget that God is infinitely beyond any of them. Augustine warns that if we think we understand God, then it isn’t God.

When icons become idols, they can fuel bigotry and oppression. People who are different from those clinging to a narrow, exclusive image of God are often viewed as less than, needing to be changed, or existing beyond the love of God. Sadly, that reality has been played out in history and continues today in anger and hatred aimed at people of color, Muslims, LGBTQ people, and other minorities.

Lots and lots of windows

Who would build a house with magnificent views on every side but include only one or two windows? A person living amidst such beauty would want windows everywhere, perhaps even floor to ceiling.

Limiting ourselves to a few images of God is like choosing not to have windows. Why would we cut ourselves off from so much of God’s glory? No! We want lots of icons, lots of windows into the Divine. Let’s go wide and look at images taken from other people and places, from literature, from nature. We have nothing to fear. Opening new windows does not close the ones we already have. It just lets in more light.

Mary van Balen holds an MA in theology and is the author of four books and numerous articles on spirituality. A spiritual director and retreat presenter, she writes a blog, “The Scallop,” and a column, “Grace in the Moment.” Both can be found on her website: www.maryvanbalen.com.