

“A living parable”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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John 1:1-5, 11-18; 20:1-18

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Imagine, if you will, that you are a six-year-old girl. (For some of you that’s going to be easier than others.) You have freckles, are tall and lanky. You spend your days, curious, meandering through the museum where your dad works. You live in Paris. The year is 1934, six years before the Nazi occupation of France. One morning, you notice that the world you see has suddenly become darker, blurrier. Your father takes you to a doctor. You hear words like “congenital cataracts” and “irreparable.” You don’t fully understand the meaning of these words until one morning you can’t see anything at all. You will be blind for the rest of your life.

This is the life of Marie-Laure, a character in Anthony Doerr’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *All the Light We Cannot See*. He writes, “What is blindness? Where there should be a wall, her hands find nothing. Where there should be nothing, a table leg gouges her shin. Cars growl in the streets; leaves whisper in the sky; blood rustles through her inner ears. In the stairwell, in the kitchen, even beside her bed, grown-up voices speak of despair.”

We who are not physically blind can never begin to know the lives of the 39 million people on this planet who are blind. But in Marie’s story there is a story that belongs to us all. The world roars in our ears, and we do not understand—not this life, not this God. We do not understand the hateful burning of three African American churches, nor the flames that engulfed Notre Dame. We do not know how grace and cancer fit together. We grope the dark mystery of a God we cannot see, whose purpose we cannot divine, who seems absent where we expected her and present where we didn’t.

In some ways, this is the story of the Bible. Moses asks to see God and is denied, told that he could not survive such a sight. Mary comes to the tomb and finds it empty. She weeps the same confused tears we ourselves have wept. “No one can see God, and live,” says Exodus. “No one has ever seen God,” says John.

What a painful proclamation!—when it is the desire of every child to know their parent. And so, in our series on Jesus’ parables, we have climbed the mountain like Moses, approached the tomb like Mary, and asked a peek at our Maker.

The word *parable* in Greek means “to set alongside.” In his parables, Jesus took something earthly, something understandable, like a lost coin, and compared it with something divine, something a lot harder to understand, like the grace of God.

Of course, parables can still be confusing. Richard Littledale compares them to those *Magic Eye* illustrations that were all the craze two decades ago—the pixilated images with a hidden picture... which I could never see! and which have forever seared onto my brain the image of

George Costanza emerging from the bathroom, shirtless, because he was so obsessed about the picture he forgot to put his shirt back on (that's a Seinfeld reference for those of you who missed the 90s). "Press your nose to things, and you'd still not see the image; stand back far away, and you'd still not see the image. The trick is for the brain to look at two sets of information at once—and out of them to construct a new three dimensional reality."

The problem is that even with Jesus' explanations, the disciples still didn't get it. When they came upon the empty tomb, John tells us they did not understand. Even angels appearing to Mary and explaining the resurrection was not enough.

This might be why the Gospel of John, unlike every other Gospel, offers no parables. Not a one. No Good Samaritan; no Lost Sheep; no Prodigal Son. John realized that Jesus' teachings weren't enough. There was only one thing that could save us, and it was the greatest parable of them all—Jesus himself.

By that, I do not mean that Jesus was a fiction. Remember the definition of a parable. "A parable rubs the mystery of human life against the mystery of God in order to produce a new understanding of the two together, which is a revelation" (Richard Lischer).

According to the Gospel of John, the creative Word—the divine in Jesus—always existed: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1). This Word was unknowable until it "became flesh and lived among us," becoming Jesus of Nazareth.

It's like how our Children's Worship Center describes parables as gifts, with an outer box and something hidden inside.

Jesus becomes a living parable—something we can touch and understand (the outer box)—so that we can perceive what is hidden inside: the mystery of God and God's grace. We couldn't see God, so God gave us a parable we could see: Jesus.

John lays it out succinctly: "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son... who has made him known" (1:18).

No other parable could dry Mary's tears that day at the tomb. Jesus whispers her name, and her eyes are opened. If the Gospel of John begins with the impossibility of seeing God, it ends on that Easter day with a woman declaring, "I have seen the Lord."

"The Messiah, according to John Dominic Crossan, finally quits telling parables, and the crucified one himself becomes the Parable of God. Humble, hidden, ironic, and subversive—in Jesus. In him, God undermines the most evil empire of all, the kingdom of death, and brings life to light by a most unlikely means" (Richard Lischer).

Imagine again that you are Marie. For a year, you have heard your father pounding away in his workshop, building a scale model of your neighborhood. It doesn't make sense. The model seems so different from the real world; it has no people, no sounds, no smells other than glue and

sawdust. It feels like a second-rate copy. But every day, your father asks you to run your fingers over the model, along street corners and rain gutters, over houses and bakeries.

On your seventh birthday, your father walks you six blocks, spins you around, and asks *you* to lead the way home. It's impossible, you say, I'm blind. Your father says, "I want you to think of the model, Marie... I'm one step behind you."

Every week you go through this ritual, and every week you fail... until one day, a year later, you do it, you make it, one step at a time, all the way home! Suddenly, the world is light, and color. Though blind, you see it all: "Cars splash along streets... snow flakes tick and patter through the trees... here the Metro hurtles beneath the sidewalk... here the sky opens up, and [you] hear the clacking of branches... [Your] father radiates a thousand colors, opal, strawberry red, deep russet, wild green."

And just as the world opens itself to you, you feel your father's hands under your arms, swinging you up in the air, spinning round and round. You have the biggest smile on your face, and he laughs this "pure, contagious laugh, one [you] will try to remember all [your] life, father and daughter turning in circles on the sidewalk in front of [your] apartment house, laughing together while snow sifts through the branches above."

You realize that the model was a kind of parable; it helped you see what you had been blind to.

My friends, this is not just the story of a seven-year-old girl in Paris; this is the story of Jesus Christ, the story of our Father teaching us to see.

In a 2011 sermon, Pope Benedict XVI said, "Ultimately, the true 'Parable' of God is Jesus himself, his Person who, through the sign of humanity at the same time conceals and reveals the divinity. In this way God does not force us to believe in him, but he draws us to himself with the truth and goodness of his incarnate Son."

Like Marie, we may not at first understand or appreciate the model, the parable. How could this Palestinian carpenter, this man who lived 2,000 years ago, possibly encompass the wonders and mysteries of the God who pervades and creates all? How could he steer us safely home?

But over and over, our Father, like Marie's, tells us, "Go on. I'm right behind you. Follow the model." We run our fingers over the pages of these stories. We watch as Jesus makes disciples out of poor fishermen and hated tax collectors. We listen as he challenges the religious and political authorities of his day, turning over tables, and caring for the ones forgotten. We taste the bread and cup he gives us, parables of their own, signs of forgiveness and total love. We feel his hand on our feet, as he kneels and washes the parts of us we are most afraid to show. We smell his sweat, as he carries the cross to that hill where they killed him. And today, the world becomes light and color. Today, we see God shine in this man, risen from the dead, this man who whispers our name and calls us home.

Suddenly, we realize that this man was a kind of parable. A parable who declared at the start of his ministry, "I have come to bring sight to the blind." **Amen.**