

There's an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* that is often called one of the best episodes in the whole seven seasons of that TV series. I'm not sure I've even seen the whole episode, but still its story sticks with me; I think about it all the time.

That story — translated as well as I can from nerdy language — goes something like this: the crew of the starship *Enterprise* (aka the main characters of the show) come into contact with a spaceship from another world — Tamaria. Although the beings on each ship speak in what we would call English, they can't understand one another. The *Enterprise* crew knows most of the individual words that the Tamarians say, but when those words get strung together, no one can figure out what that sentence is meant to communicate.

For instance: Captain Picard ends up on a planet alone with the captain of the other ship. The other captain says, “Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra” and then tosses him a dagger. Picard has no idea what's going on. Is he going to have to fight this man? What does he want?

Eventually Picard and the crew figure out the key to understanding the Tamarian language. Every phrase they say to one another is a reference to a story from their culture. Every short string of words communicates a whole world of characters and emotions and morals. And so when the other captain said just those five words to Picard— “Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra” — he was telling Captain Picard so much: he was referencing a story about two warriors who were forced to fight dangerous beasts on an island together and then became friends; and when he referenced that story, he was telling Picard that there was a dangerous beast near them; he was telling him he would fight by his side; and he was telling him that he hoped they could become friends; and maybe he was saying even more — all with just five words.¹

Maybe you actually have a similar language with family or close friends: a bank of stories you draw on together, stories you can reference quickly but that communicate a history of inside jokes or shared memories and meaning. I notice that we Christians do that a lot with our most well-known Bible stories: making quick references to a snake in a garden or “loaves and fishes” and immediately knowing the whole story behind it.

¹ *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. “Darmok.” Episode 102 (season 5, episode 2). Directed by Winrich Kolbe. Story by Joe Menosky and Phillip LaZebnik. Teleplay by Joe Menosky. September 30, 1991. (Synopsis available online: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darmok>)

Stories sometimes explain things better than straightforward language or precise definitions. This week during Vacation Bible School, we taught the kids a verse from the Psalms: “God is our refuge and strength” (Psalm 46:1). In order to help them understand what refuge means, we could have given them the dictionary’s definition: “shelter or protection from danger or distress.”² But instead we told them stories: Here’s a picture of elephants at a place called an elephant refuge. The elephants go there so they can be protected and taken care of. What would that feel like?

When it comes to explaining the important, technical words of our faith, I think stories work better than definitions. After all the stories came first: scholars formalized the words and concepts later. We tell the story of a holy man who fed the hungry and healed the sick and made friends with sinners, who preached things like, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,” who was executed and raised from the dead. And from that story we get words like grace and salvation, Trinity and justification and sacrificial atonement and hypostatic union. And then too often we trip all over ourselves trying to explain those concepts, or we get into really convoluted arguments with one another, or tie ourselves to the definitions we’ve made, and sometimes the story gets lost — the very story that made us think up all those concepts in the first place, the story that teaches us all those things best of all.

Stories — old stories, new stories — are a better language for learning our faith. Like those short phrases from that *Star Trek* episode, stories communicate on so many more levels than definitions, and they reach us in a different way.

A theological scholar was once asked to define “grace”, and he said: “Have you ever stared up at the stars on a very clear night. You know how that feels? God’s grace is like that.”³ That little story is more meaningful to me than any book or essay I could have read on grace.

Our readings this morning bring us a couple of those Christian vocabulary words. First we heard a story of God creating the world; and when it got to the part about God creating humans, we heard: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27).

“Image of God” is one of those phrases that scholars have picked out of that story and pinned down for examination and definition. How exactly did God create us in the image of God? Does God look like us? Does it mean that God gave us some quality that God has: the ability to create, the responsibility to care for this world, the ability to reason at a higher level than the other animals? There are thousands of years of ideas and debate to inspire us.

² [Merriam-Webster.com](https://www.merriam-webster.com)

³ Fuzzy memory of a lecture by Elsa Tamez at Vanderbilt Divinity School.

I thought of that question — What does it mean that we are created in the image of God? — this week after hearing a story on NPR. It was an interview with Will Bardenwerper, author of a book called *Prisoner in His Palace*, about the twelve U.S. soldiers charged with guarding Saddam Hussein for the months between his capture and execution.

The interview starts with Bardenwerper explaining how those soldiers reacted when they were assigned to guard “the most wanted dictator on the planet.” He said, “I think one of them just blurted out, we should kill him.” But then Bardenwerper explained how things inevitably changed as they spent time with Hussein. They saw a very private, human side of him: a man under house arrest but still carrying himself with dignity; a man spending his days pedaling a squeaky exercise bike. He would greet them with respect, engage them in conversation, play cards and drink tea and smoke cigars with them.

One of the soldiers developed enough of a rapport with Hussein that when the soldier got word that his brother, back home in the U.S., was about to die, he let Hussein know that he’d be gone for a week and why. “[Hussein] got up and embraced him and said...don’t worry. You’re losing one brother, but I will always be your brother.”

Bardenwerper made it clear that the soldiers didn’t suddenly start to think of Hussein as a friend and a good guy. They always wondered how much of his behavior with them was genuine affection and how much was manipulation. They were there to do the job of guarding this prisoner, and that’s what they did. They still knew him as the infamous dictator, they remembered that he was on trial for crimes against humanity; but now they also knew him as a fellow human being.

Bardenwerper said that one of the main themes that emerged from his interviews with these soldiers was how much harder it was to guard someone and then watch him get led away to be executed when you’ve gotten to know him as another human being.⁴

That story told me something about what it means that we are made in the “image of God.” That divine image may be covered up by sin so that it’s hard for us to see in another person (or even in ourselves) — but still there’s something at the basic level of each human being that we recognize, that we all share, that loves and cries out for love — some part of us that was so obviously created by a good and loving God.

⁴ Rachel Martin interview of Will Bardenwerper. “‘Prisoner In His Palace’: Saddam Hussein and His American Guards.” National Public Radio Morning Edition, June 5, 2017. Available online: <http://www.npr.org/2017/06/05/531536419/the-prisoner-in-his-palace> Accessed June 12, 2017.

And I think so many of our big Christian vocabulary words — salvation and community and mission and grace — are, in at least one simple sense, about how God helps us to see that divine image in ourselves and in others, how God helps us to pull that “image of God” part of us out from underneath our sin and our guilt and our bad habits and our insecurities and our complexes and whatever else is covering it up— how God lifts that “image of God” in us closer and closer to the surface.

God’s work to lift up the image of God in us is done through relationship: through our relationships with one another, and through our relationship with God. That was obvious in the story of the guards and Saddam Hussein. When we humans really get to know one another, the relationship breaks down our prejudices and helps us see the many layers of each person. It complicates our judgement of one another. It helps us remember that God created each of us and God loves each of us — even the most egregious of sinners. And it is relationship with God that helps to heal and restore the image of God in us.

Today is Holy Trinity Sunday, and so we are reminded of another one of those big Christian vocabulary words that is endlessly debated and — perhaps more than any other concept — endlessly confusing. But the story of the Trinity is what we’ve been thinking about all along: it is the story of relationship. The Trinity is the story of one God who is, somehow, also three Persons – the story of a God whose very being is relationship.

And that lofty idea of the Trinity was drawn out of the stories of the early church – the stories those first Christians told of how they experienced relationship with God: God the creator, Parent to us all; God the Son, who walked next to them in flesh like a brother; God the Spirit, who spoke in their hearts to comfort and guide them, who prayed with them, who made them always aware of the divine presence.

As the Triune God draws us into relationship, into the divine dance of compassion and loving judgement and never-ending grace, God helps us see the image of that very Triune God in ourselves and in others, and God sends us out into the world to love others and draw them into the “Dance of Trinity” with us. Thanks be to God.