

Visible Words: The Image Is the Message

Sandra Essex

From our earliest existence, we have been creators. We have made images, art, with our hands. We drew on the walls of our cave homes. We formed clay into pottery and decorated it. We took metal from the earth and hammered it into objects of beauty and objects for adornment.

But before we ever were, GOD IS. Our God is a creator God; God is Ultimate Artist. He made for us an incredibly beautiful world of visible words, images that send out the undeniable message again and again of how much God loves us, how much He delights in us, how much He cares for us. God speaks to us and nourishes us daily through the work of His hands.

WORD, in Hebrew, is Dabhar, and means the creative energy of God, the deeds and actions, the expressed, manifested mind and will of God. This creative, loving, intelligent energy of God became one of us and lived among us! Incredible! And just as staggering is that we are empowered with this same dynamic, creative life force. Through the work of our hands and minds, we can allow this loving energy of a creator God to flow through us and into the lives of others.

Art, then, is the visible words for our response to the beautiful, mysterious energy of God's love manifested in our world. Sometimes, the work of my hands may be the only way I can express the experiences and emotions I am unable to articulate. In using my art as visible words, it is possible for me to reach out to you and say, "I, too, feel as you do," "I, too, am frightened," "I, too, need to know that I am loved." Through images I can rejoice with you at the birth of a child, or cry with you at the death of a marriage. We can celebrate whose we are and who we are by what we make with our hands. Art reconnects us both with each other and to the Ultimate Source of our Being: God the Creator, God the Liberator, and God the Joy Giver. Through the beauty of this world, God speaks to our eyes and our hearts; we answer Him with the work of our hands.

As an artist, I must take responsibility for what I do and say. I must internalize the message that I hope to communicate to others through an image. I must be able to answer for my art. If the work of my hands is truly

mine, then I am compelled to know why I create as I do. And so my work has caused me to look with fresh eyes at words and images that have become all too familiar. How do I, as an artist, express the eternal truths in the images, symbols, and logos of our contemporary world?

I work very simply; my work is not complex. Sometimes I find it very difficult to work simply, for I must find the essence of what I want to say; and if my design is strong, there is nothing else to detract the eye. The visible words I want to communicate must stand alone. Therefore, each project takes many, many hours of prayer, of research, drawing, reading, writing, uneasy growth, and more prayer. Perhaps, in the long run, it is not what I create that is of importance, but rather, what I become because of what I have done.

Twice, in less than one year, Death held my life within his hands; twice God returned my life to me. More than for any other reason, all of my recent work has been a response of thanksgiving to God for giving me back my life and for allowing me the acknowledging of His Presence. To know God is to know unspeakable Joy. That Joy of the knowledge of God exhilarates! It frees! It energizes! It makes all things beautiful! Perhaps, in some way, my art may express the Reality, the Truth, the Joy and Strength that God is. God says, "I AM" and He is! Beyond our wildest imaginations, God is all that He says He is.

And yet, I continue to fail Him. I was awaiting tests at a local hospital. As an old hand at such procedures, I had brought a book to read. A woman sat down beside me. I looked up and smiled; she smiled back, apprehensively. I returned to my reading. She asked me a question. I answered kindly, but did not involve myself further. I wanted to return to my book. She sat, her hands twisting in her lap. I did not reach out to her. I wanted to read. The medical test I passed that day; the Good Samaritan test of my Lord's, I failed, miserably.

One's growth in faith, as in one's craft, is often slow, and sometimes, painful. But when we have struggled, when we have fought it out, we are able to reach out to those around us. The images we bring forth help us share the love, and the joy, and the strength which God gives to all of us, if only we will believe and trust Him. It is not easy for me, the artist, to share my soul, for often tears are the prayers and the words of my heart as I create.

Recently, I calligraphed a card for a couple whose infant son lived only a few hours. What does one say when a tiny baby dies? I had begun a card, but it wasn't right and I had put it aside. I awoke in the night and I knew I had to use the baby's name. So I wrote, Jacob, softly as a whisper. Then again, in a deeper color so that it read, "Jacob, Jacob". And I surrounded it with the words from Isaiah, "I have called you by name. You are mine. You are precious in my sight." Several weeks later, Jacob's mother embraced me at church and said, "How much your card meant to us. We have

had it framed. We have so few things to remember Jacob by.” I humbly thank God for the visible words He allowed my hands to speak for Him.

Often, it is only in retrospect that we are able to see how God, the master craftsman, weaves our talents, our faith, and our experiences into the richest of tapestries. When I was confirmed, I was given the verse, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.” Through the years, I have tried to hold to the good counsel of that verse. But the struggle of finding what God’s will is for me has taken much effort and many, many prayers and, at times, I still am not sure what it is He wants of me.

As a college senior, I walked into the Metals Room for the first time and knew immediately that working in silver was what I wanted to do. And so began a dream. Marriage and the demands of a young family forced me to lay aside my metalsmithing. But God has His ways of honing our talents. Banners and stitchery became my creative outlet. This was the beginning of a ministry through the varied work of my hands, although I didn’t know it yet. When the children were a little older, God, again, allowed me time for my silver. A sudden and prolonged illness took away the strength necessary to work metal, but God turned my hands to calligraphy and made me reach into the very fabric of my faith in order to create. How beautifully He has interwoven my life and my art. Now with sons grown and health restored, God has returned me to school and my silversmithing and the dream that I have held. My husband, now, would like to collaborate with me. Where God may be leading us in this, we are not sure. How He will use my new skills in metal, I do not know. But I am certain that in the coming years, I will be able to continue to look back and say with joy and with gratitude, “The LORD is my strength and my Song.” For He has allowed me to share the joy of His message through the visible words of art, the work of my hands.