



October 16, 2011

Sermon by Rev. Nancy Talbot

“The God I Don't Believe In”

Readings: Exodus 33: 17-23, Acts 17: 22-28

When I was in my late twenties I was introduced to a form of prayer called guided visualized meditation. Many of you will be familiar with this form of contemplation in which one person guides another in entering into various scenes in their imagination. It's a practice we've done from time to time here in worship on Sunday mornings.

The very first time I experienced guided meditation, my minister at the time who was leading the process, asked us to imagine we were in an open field, then walking through a forest, then we were taken to a lake and finally at the edge of the lake we were invited to imagine a spiritual guide meeting us there. Looking up to meet my guide eye to eye I saw clearly before me an old man with a long grey beard wearing flowing white robes.

He was at that time in my life the only God I had ever known, the only spiritual guide anyone had ever invited me to imagine.

When the meditation was over, I was eager to share my experience with the group. It had been a wonderful experience but I will always remember what my minister said to me that evening. She very kindly suggested that the reason my spiritual guide had appeared in such a predictable and traditional fashion was because that was where I was at in my spiritual journey. It was the first time in my life anyone suggested I could be anywhere else other than where I currently was in my understanding myself and God. It was also the moment the door was opened for me to a quest that continues to this day.

I am a child of the United Church of Canada – I grew up going to church on Sundays. And although I am sure there were lots of open minded people in the church of my childhood, no one ever suggested we envision God as anything other than a man and an old almighty one at that.

I don't think it ever occurred to anyone that it mattered that God was always referred to as a man who was all knowing and all powerful. It didn't really matter to me as a child, at least I didn't think it did.

Perhaps that's because my overwhelming recollection of the God I was introduced to as a child is of a loving God, a caring God, someone who watched over me and knew my every move. He was a father figure and because my own father was also a loving and kind man, I didn't mind having another kind man in my life.

And yet I can clearly remember a moment in my teenage years when I stood self-consciously before getting into the shower wondering if God really could see me, even when I was naked. I was convinced he could and in that moment I remember feeling a certain amount of shame, kind of like Eve in the garden. So even though I had a sense that God loved me, on some level I was also appropriating that there were things about me that weren't quite up to God's standards.

I don't think I really knew how deep seeded this was until years later when a good friend of mine, someone who had grown up in the same church as me, experienced an unwanted pregnancy, a pregnancy out of wedlock. I remember going to visit her just after she discovered the news. Already frightened at what her parents would think if they found out, she started crying as she wondered what God would think of her. "I don't want God to think I'm a bad person" she sobbed.

In that moment I became painfully aware that although by then my own notions of God had begun to shift, the God she was stuck with was the God of our childhood, the God who loved us but also judged us for our bad behavior, the God who I'm pretty sure she believed caused her pregnancy because she had been doing something this God would not have approved of, she had been disobedient.

It's no wonder she still doesn't attend church to this day.

The God she had been left with is the God who has become so unpersuasive to so many: the God of judgement who's love for us requires our obedience; the God who is all powerful and all knowing; who lives far, far away; but who periodically intervenes in our lives and in history when he feels like it and usually in quite spectacular ways and who is most definitely a man.

The God I no longer believe in.

This is the God who is most commonly known in our culture and who for many is the only way they have ever understood "God" to be.

For some this image of God continues to provide great comfort and satisfaction for their life of faith, but for many others it's a concept that no longer has any credibility.

Women struggle with the exclusively male imagery for the one in whose image we too have been created. Some folks, both men and women, whose relationships with their own fathers have been broken find no comfort in the image of God as father or God in any anthropomorphic image for that matter.

But perhaps most compelling is scientific discovery. It is a bit hard to hold on to an image of God as a man living in the clouds when on any given day we can take an airplane beyond the clouds. And even the concept of a God who lives in the heavens is challenging these days. Just where are the heavens anyway? And how many light years would we have to travel to get there? No wonder God seems so distant and far away to many.

Finally there's the issue of why bad things happen to good people. If God is all powerful and all knowing and has the ability to intervene where and when he wants to – why didn't he stop the genocide in Rwanda or the holocaust in Europe? Why isn't he doing something about the Horn of Africa where so many are starving? Why oh why does he not intervene on behalf of a child suffering abuse? Or a teenager killed by a drunk driver? Or our loved ones dying before their time with cancer?

I don't know about you but I don't want to believe in a God who has the ability to intervene in these kinds of circumstances and chooses not to. In fact I cannot believe in that kind of God. But sadly many people think this is the only God the Christian faith has to offer.

And yet if we look closely, we see that the bible actually holds many images of God utilizing metaphors and poetic language to point toward what is ultimately mystery. In scripture we can hear the Divine described as a potter, a cup, a path, a safe place, a rock, an eagle, a whirlwind, a mother hen protecting her chicks and more.

In this morning's reading from the Hebrew scriptures we find Moses longing deeper contact with the God he first encountered as a burning bush. "Allow me to see who you are" he says to God, portraying for us the age-old search to know who and what God really is. "Don't worry. I'm with you. Trust me" replies God. But Moses persists. "Hide over there in the cleft of that rock and I will let my glory pass before you, you cannot see my face but there you will catch a glimpse of my backside" says God. So Moses does what he is told and the glory of God passes before him.

But the word backside really isn't the best translation of what God says to Moses. The Hebrew word used here is the word "achorai" which is better translated as "my afterward" It's a lovely suggestion that even though we may never be able to see a being called God, we can experience the power and the presence of the divine in our lives and in our relationships with others. The effect the Divine has on people's lives.

Some say this power and presence is an energy or a life force that is not yet finished working and growing and becoming in the universe which is why we can never fully "see" it. It is an all encompassing spirit. My friend and colleague Bruce Sanguin says that we can know this spirit through our own consciousness and yet is far greater than our own consciousness.

Marcus Borg talks about this presence in a slightly different way. He refers to another Biblical image for God that we heard this morning, one attributed to the apostle Paul in which he says God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being. Something theologian Paul Tillich called this the ground of our being.

Borg calls this way of understanding God "panentheism" meaning everything is in God and the reverse of that God is in everything. Not God far away, but God right here and yet God bigger than here as well. And because we are literally swimming in God, according to Borg, that's why we are never able to fully describe the mystery of who and what God is. We can only see "the afterward." It's a very biblical way of understanding the Divine.

Rather than having a blueprint carved in stone for each of our individual lives, rather than intervening in our lives when we ask nicely or when we're well behaved, this panentheistic understanding speaks of Divine intention and Divine interaction as the primary way God is in relationship with us. So when it comes to suffering and why bad things happening to good people, Borg would say that Divine intention is always for our good. God's intention is love and compassion. Life leans towards life. Even though many days it does not seem to be true, the world is becoming a more loving and peace filled place to be and our interactions in life help that to become more fully so. We participate as co- creators with the Divine in making the world a more loving place.

Some days we do that well and some days we don't. Evil and suffering are simply the cost of being part of a universe that is still evolving, still in the process of working itself out. Divine interaction means that when we are in those dark places in our lives Divine energy works with us to bring new life out of those places. That's something we in the church would call grace. It's very different than saying God causes us to experience those difficult places for a reason.

But if we are to imagine God as an all encompassing Spirit as a kind of consciousness rather than as a being situated outside ourselves, the obvious question for the church is what do we do about petitionary prayer? If God doesn't intervene in our lives then why bother with prayer?

I had the opportunity to ask Marcus Borg that question directly a couple years ago and I loved his reply. He said that prayer is one of the ways that we care about one another. It makes us more conscious of one another. Then he added, it might just do some good so we shouldn't limit ourselves from the possibilities.

Many of us who have been prayed for in our lives would agree that it does do good even though we may not be able to explain how or why that is.

One thing that Marcus Borg and others are certain of is that prayer that centers us in the divine presence and calls upon divine qualities such as love and courage and strength opens our hearts and helps us change and change the world.

That night I was first invited into a guided meditation envisioning a spiritual guide waiting for me on the other side of a lake, I could never have imagined where that journey we take me. If I were invited into the same contemplation today I have no idea what I would see when I looked into the eyes of the spirit that guides me, perhaps a beautiful white light, perhaps the whole of the cosmos, perhaps the faces of those with whom I journey. My own understanding of the Divine has become much more cosmic and much more evolutionary in nature these days.

I'm not so concerned any more about whether we call God he or she or any particular name at all. What I'm concerned about is that we have the freedom to imagine and the willingness to care ,because it does matters how we think and talk about and experience God or not. It matters to us as individuals, it matters to us as a global family, it matters to other species with which we share this planet and it matters to our planet as a whole.

In the words of theologian Dominic Crossan, the question what is the nature and character of your God? is one of the most important questions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I wonder how it is you will respond?