



Oct. 18, 2009

Sermon by Rev. Nancy Talbot

*The God I Don't Believe In*

In 1996—the year after I was ordained – the United Church of Canada published a new hymn book called *Voices United*. “Bring Many Names” – the hymn we sang at the beginning of our service this morning – was one of the new pieces the book introduced to the church – I can still remember singing it for the first time in a Sunday morning worship service.

There I was standing at the back of the church - tears welling up in my eyes -- fighting to get control of my emotions as the organist started to play the opening notes of the piece and I prepared to process into the sanctuary with the choir singing the words “strong mother God – working night and day – planning all the wonders of creation.” It was years before I could sing that hymn without shedding a tear.

Today I find myself wondering why-- why was it that those words touched my soul so deeply? What was that about for me?

I'm a child of the United Church of Canada – I grew up going to church on Sundays. I suspect that in the church of my childhood there would have been lots of people who would have been quite okay with the words of the hymn “Bring Many names” It's just that I don't think it ever occurred to anyone that it mattered that God was always referred to as a man. It didn't really matter to me -- or did it?

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. In fact I can clearly remember a moment in my life 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 although I had a sense that God loved me – on some level I was definitely appropriating that there were things about me that weren't quite up to God's standards.

This was really driven home to me many years later when a good friend of mine – someone who had grown up in the same church as me –experienced an unwanted pregnancy. 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.

By then my own notions of God had begun to shift and I lamented that the God she had been left with – was the God of judgment – the God who I'm pretty sure she believed caused her pregnancy because of course she had been doing something that God would not have approved of – because she had been disobedient.

This was the God I no longer believed in – the God of judgment whose love for me required my obedience -- the same God who has become so unpersuasive to so many.



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Whether we went to church as children or not – we are familiar with this God. This is the God who is most commonly known in our culture.

He is of course a man– he usually has a beard thanks to the many artists who have depicted him with one. And he lives somewhere “out there” -- he’s a kind of “super being” someone who really can see you when you are getting into the shower – because of course he is all powerful and all knowing.

He loves us – but he also judges us and has requirements or laws for us to live by. And although he lives in a faraway place – from time to time he intervenes in our lives – often in quite extraordinary ways.

For many people – this concept of God is the only meaning the word “God” has ever had for them.

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.

And then there’s scientific discovery – it is a bit hard to hold on to an image of God 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 on earth didn’t he stop the genocide in Rwanda or the holocaust in Europe? 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 circumstance and chooses not to – in fact I cannot believe in that kind of god.

Sadly many people think this is the only God the Christian faith has to offer.

Often people will say to me that this is the God of the Old Testament – and they don’t like him.



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But if we look more closely – the Old Testament – or the Hebrew scriptures as I prefer to call them -- hold other images of God as well – we encountered one of them today in the story of Moses.

Although this God is intervening in history in a dramatic way and is referred to as “Lord” and “he” those of you who know the story will remember that this God does not appear in human form but rather in the form of a burning bush. But of greater interest to me this morning than this image – is how God names Godself to Moses.

Who shall I say has sent me to free the people? Moses asks God -- tell them – “I am who I am” has sent you.” Another translation says “I am who I am becoming.”

My colleague Bruce Sanguin has a wonderful way of talking about this name as God’s revelation that conscious awareness is part of the core identity of the divine. Rather than seeing God as a ruler who lives far away — God can be known as the source and the substance of our own conscious awareness.

In other words – the more we know ourselves – the more we know God.

God then becomes not so much a person – but rather an all encompassing spirit – a presence – a presence that can be known through our own consciousness – and yet is far greater than our own consciousness.

And when God is seen as the great I am who is also still becoming the great I am – there is cause to embrace the notion of a God who is evolving – a presence, an energy a life-force that is not yet finished working and growing and becoming in the universe.

And if this God is a part of us – if we are made in this God’s image – then our role in life is to co-create with God – the world that is yet to be – through conscious awareness – through conscious action.

Marcus Borg talks about this God in a slightly different way.. He refers to another biblical image for God that we heard this morning – one attributed to the apostle Paul. God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being. 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 – we are never able to fully describe the mystery of who and what God is.

Rather than having a blueprint carved in stone for each of our individual lives -- rather than intervening in our lives when we ask nicely – when we’re well behaved -- this panentheistic understanding speaks of divine intention and divine interaction.



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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 -- the moral arc of history is always bending towards justice and freedom.

Evil and suffering is the cost of being part of a universe that is still evolving – still in the process of working itself out

-- I would add it is also the cost of being given the freedom to live as we chose to live.

Divine interaction means that when we are in those dark places in our lives – God works with us to bring new life out of those places – which is different than saying God causes us to experience those places for a reason.

So what do we do about petitionary prayer? – If God doesn't intervene in our lives -- then why bother with prayer? I asked Marcus Borg that this summer 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 -- and then he said and it might just do some good – so therefore 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.

So now you know a lot about the God I don't believe in – and a little about the God I do believe in.

But what about those tears trickling down my face at the back of the church everytime I sang the words strong mother God – what was that about?

13 years later I'm not so concerned about whether we call God he or she or universe if that's what works best for you.... what I'm concerned about is that we have the freedom to imagine -- and the willingness to care – because it does matter 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.