

“Bring Many Names” by Margreta Silverstone



March 15, 2020

The Third Sunday in Lent

Good morning. As you may recall, Eyes to See Ears to Hear Peace Prayer Mission Group has been in conversation with Celebration Circle for the past year about our naming of God within corporate worship. As part of that conversation, the mission group agreed to provide a series of sermons. This also follows on the Epiphany series of sermons that introduced you to the call and focus of the various mission groups within Seekers.

As a side note and given we are not meeting in person after this Sunday for a while, I encourage you to take the liturgy and the bulletin cover home. The inside has Peter's many names for God. I used a random number generator to pick between 1 and 101 for each column and found different names. You will hear the results of this in what I share today.

We, as a faith community, benefit from the shared leadership that is embodied within mission groups. We benefit from Time & Space for the ongoing use and maintenance of this building. We benefit from Celebration Circle for their thoughtfulness in organizing our corporate worship. We benefit from Learners & Teachers for the weekly School for Christian Growth. And, we benefit from the Eyes to See, Ears to Hear peace prayer mission group with the Peace and Justice prayer that allows us to move from the gathering downstairs to the journey and gathering here. We, as a faith community, rely on this corporate body to strengthen and encourage our individual faith journeys. As we face into the new challenge of our community's corporate health, we may need to learn new patterns of how to rely on each other in the days ahead.

For the past 3 years, I have been a member of the Eyes to See, Ears to Hear mission group. I explored with them (and never left) after having the Koinonia mission group put down its call. I've briefly been a member of Celebration Circle and I've been a member of Learners and Teachers. I encourage all to consider joining a mission group – as a place to use your skills and passion, a place to build your faith through the regular rubbing shoulders with other Seekers, and find and develop deep friendships that can support you through difficult times.

I'm not sure what the formal documentation says is the call of the Eyes to See, Ears to Hear Peace Prayer mission group but I would name it as a place where we gather and pray for the places that need peace, justice and healing. Sometimes the prayer time is quiet and at other times we have plenty of places in the world that we name out loud in need of Holy Intervention. I am not sure where I heard this first, but I think of it as a place where I am holding both the newspaper and the Bible and holding into the light what insight I may have gained from both. And, today, part of that news is around Covid-19 and what faith actions to take.

Let us pray. Holy Other, If you can't make us unafraid, O God, at least make our fears a bridge to others, an empathetic tie that binds. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be of value to you, Holy One, ground of our being who opens the path to our personal and communal salvation. Amen.

Today's passages reflect a full human experience, from grumbling in the desert, exasperation from Moses, Paul's admonition to find joy in hardship and the Samaritan woman's longing. In corporate worship, we did not read the Psalm where we have to wrestle with text that has God pretty angry with followers who don't follow.

Considering how central water is in most of these texts, I know this would be a very different sermon if Kolya was giving it than me.

Our corporate relationship with the Optimistic Nursing Song of Gentleness is complicated. Our individual relationship with the Song can also be complicated. Because of these complications, it is my belief that our corporate language for naming the Great Other has to be nuanced to provide healing and wholeness.

Last week, in Circle Time, many of you heard me complain that I don't like the theme, "How Can These Things Be?" In today's lectionary readings, the question rephrased could be:

- How can we be led out of Egypt to this wilderness and have no water? – the people.
- How can you put me in charge of a bunch of quarreling people who are about to kill me? – Moses.
- How can I get water? – Jesus.
- How can my past life experience be known? – the Samaritan woman.
- How can he be talking to her? Or How did he get water and food? – the disciples.

- How can we have hope? – Paul.

While these questions may be intellectually interesting, I continue to be more engaged by what to do next. I can choose the nature of the actions I take in response – initially it may be wonder and amazement. It may be worry and fear. It may be prayer and action.

How can these things be? Outside of reflections on the text, your response to the Lenten theme may largely be individual. Your things may be health related or financially related or in the context of your family dynamics and social relationships. For me, the individual “How Can These Things Be?” include:

- How can Jeffrey have cancer?
- How can I be primarily out of the workforce?
- How can my family’s financial health depend on Jeffrey’s employee benefit of medical insurance?
- How can various things in the house break down?
- How can I maintain my health?

These things are as they are. The question is what do I do about them? Do I have a Moses to turn to and complain? Does doing that do any good? It might give me an immediate (but short lived) sense of relief. Yes, sometimes, I turn to my mission group to fill that role.

Do I take it to the Ingenious Nourishing Cry of New Beginnings? And, what do I do with the Cry’s response? If looking at the Gospel, the Samaritan woman did ask Jesus to give her the living water so that she would not have to keep coming back to the daily tasks of getting water. And, in the exchange between them it seems the water was self knowledge and acceptance and energy to do her part. I am out of the workforce and yet do what I can to care for the family, generate some income, and stay open to tasks that may need my time and attention – whether they are paid or not.

Do I take it to the Beneficent Groaning Word of Salvation?

And, what do I do with the Word's response if it is like the Roman's text? If looking at Romans, the answer may seem like silence so that I may be build character and hope and love within me.

Do I take it to the Awesome Caressing Dawn of Outcasts? And, what do I do with the Dawn's response if it is like the Psalms – anger? Then, I may need to find forgiveness. Repent.

As a faith community, we have corporate questions about “How Can These Things Be?” Our corporate questions could include:

- How can Corona Virus be?
- How can global warming be?
- How can you/we use gender based and anthropomorphic names for God?
- How can the hurt be?

These things are and, after wonder and reflection, there are choices to be made about actions and response. Yes, sometimes we turn to the Servant Leadership Team to act like Moses – hear our complaints and let them deal with God. Sometimes we turn to the Stewards for decisions, like a Jesus' disciples.

Can we take these questions to the Magnificent Initiating Elder of Grace? Can we learn and respond? What does healing water look like? What does reconciliation built upon hope look like?

The challenge, while standing here, is that all these questions are present. I carry my individual response, my corporate response as a community member, and my unique role today as preacher to mitigate the Bold Trusting Birther of New Life's word back to us – individually and as the collective body of Christ.

I am grateful for the way Seeker's informs my spiritual life. My spiritual life is also informed by other sources. Certainly, my past faith experience continues to inform the

present. My own daily spiritual disciplines also inform my faith. And, like a second worship service, Krista Tippett's "On Being" gives me new insights. I am grateful there are new voices, like Serena Jones, who can redefine John Calvin's teachings. I am glad to have heard people like Greg Boyle, who encourage me to see how the Faithful, Pursuing Guide of Majesty's love is so great there is no room or time for judgment. And, I am glad Krista interviewed Ruby Sales some months ago to let me see afresh the role that gender based and anthropomorphic names for God may have in an individual's faith journey. I know some of you listen to Krista before church on Sunday mornings on WAMU. You can also listen to her (or read) from her website (<https://onbeing.org/>)

As a white American born in the USA, my experience and ancestry puts me in a historical context to the term King or Lord or Sir that is from an association with dominance. Within the community of faith, using these terms can recall enslavement, separation and degradation. Within the Eyes to See mission group, there are have been many conversations about how these terms have been associated with an Empire mentality that demeaned and degraded other people, other cultures, other ways of faith. It made the Celebration Circle's Lenten theme last year of the Citizenship of the Empire of God a challenge. As a white American born in the USA, my experience and ancestry puts me in a particular historical context. For me in my role within this space, I must be mindful of what my words and background convey to this faith community.

Ruby Sales, from her African American experience and ancestry, identifies that these terms (Lord, Sir), when used by African Americans in the context of enslavement, allowed people the ability to see beyond the white plantation owner. Naming God as Lord and Sir put that plantation owner below God. It allowed the African American to claim a relationship beyond the current experience. It allowed the African American to

belong to a larger story, beyond that of the plantation. These names for God brought healing and wholeness.

As a young female in an early work setting, I was sexually assaulted by my employer's adult family member. This work experience has had a lasting impression on me and my self image which only over the past 3 years have I been able to face. It has impacted my ability to claim a relationship with God. At best, I can say that it caused me to go numb in believing that the Dark Gathering Fire of the Fallen could and does care about me physically.

Ruby Sales, in the interview with Krista Tippett, (see <https://onbeing.org/programs/ruby-sales-where-does-it-hurt>) identified a key question for all of us currently is "Where does it hurt?" When asking this question, the answer provided may open us up to the healing and wholeness that is totally Other. I cannot help but believe the conversation Jesus had with the Samaritan woman was exactly this. No, she did not currently have a husband. She had been with 5 different men. We do not know the quality of those relationships. We do know that the quality of the interaction she had with Jesus caused her to leave her water jug at the well and go tell the community about her interaction.

Where does it hurt? Where is your individual hurt? Where is the community hurt? How can the Powerful Reconciling Originator of Dawn help?

For me, after recognizing the hurt that was deeply part of my childhood experience, I've had to learn The Powerful Protecting Surgeon of Gentleness does care about my physical well being. Certainly my ability to care for others depends on my own physical well being. My own emotional and spiritual well being is connected to physical well being too.

At the start of this conversation about naming God with Celebration Circle, I was in the position where I did not want

any naming of the Unknowable Hoping Giver of Life and Death in anthropomorphic terms. Yet, over the past year, it has been with the use of such terms that I have been more able to hear and believe the Giver cares for my physical well being. So, when I found myself engaged in conversation with Celebration Circle about the names of God, I found I could not recommend eliminating gender based and anthropomorphic terms. I found a desire to encourage the other names.

As Ruby Sales identified, when my identity had been wrapped up into my whiteness and access to power and domination and that no longer exists, where is the wholeness? Where is the water? Where does it hurt and how can healing come?

Again, to quote Ruby, "There's a spiritual crisis in white America. It's a crisis of meaning. We talk a lot about black theologies, but I want a liberating white theology. I want a theology that speaks to Appalachia. I want a theology that begins to deepen people's understanding about their capacity to live fully human lives and to touch the goodness inside of them, rather than call upon the part of themselves that's not relational. Because there's nothing wrong with being European-American. That's not the problem. It's how you actualize that history and how you actualize that reality. It's almost like white people don't believe that other white people are worthy of being redeemed."

What does the healing water look like? What does reconciliation built upon hope look like? If the Godhood of Jesus is not an effective name for seeing and believing and accepting healing and meaning, what name do you need to hear? What names do we need to hear?

What water, what word can I find to heal my brokenness? What water, what word can I offer to you to heal your brokenness and help you see your worth and meaning? What water, what word can I offer us collectively to restore? May my naming of the Eternal Creating Champion of Faith heal not harm. In the name

of God I can inadvertently inflict harm or make whole. What I can call God in my private faith time is different than what I can use in a corporate setting.

To quote Ruby again, “We live in a very diverse world, and to talk about what it means to be humans is to talk with the simultaneous tongue of universality and particularities.... We’ve got to stop speaking about humanity as if it’s monolithic. We’ve got to wrap our consciousness around a world where people bring to the world vastly different histories and experiences, but at the same time, a world where we experience grief and love in some of the same ways. So how do we develop theologies that weave together the “I” with the “we” and the “we” with the “I”?

Our scripture readings tell both individual stories and hold universal truths. God is big enough to take our questions, our grumblings, and our fear about Covid-19. God recognizes our need for relationship – even if that is a misguided series of relationships. There are specifics to the stories that we do not share and there are truths that remain for all of us.

How Can These Things Be? Our corporate relationship with the Joyful Nourishing Comforter of Growth is complicated. Our individual relationship with God can also be complicated. Because of these complications, it is my belief that our corporate language for naming the Great Other has to be nuanced to provide individual and corporate healing and wholeness.

I would like to end with the prayer that I gave as the Peace & Justice prayer over a year ago. Let us pray:

God, we confess we live in a time of intense turmoil – social, political, and planetary.

You, God, have seen it before. Help us to see this with your eyes.

God, we confess the deeper disturbance is at the level of soul. We have lost the capacity to face the darkness without falling into despair or denial.

You, God, are our source of hope and light. Encourage and strengthen us to turn toward the darkness, to be amazed and transformed by what we find there. Give us hope.

God, our hearts grow heavy and numb from the news of violence and injustice all around us.

Help us to pray, even when we don't see any "way out," any action step, even, perhaps, any hope.

Help us to hold the suffering and agony.

God, in our praying, in our faithfulness, in our weakness, help us to see ways to engage, ways to connect to your healing and love.

Encourage us to be your loving people in the time of turmoil.

Amen.