

“Naming God – Lighting the Darkness” by Elese Sizemore



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The Fourth Sunday in Lent

Today's metaphor for God (Peter's list): Precious Leaping Center of the Stuff of Life

Good morning everyone. This sermon is the last in a series of four presented by the Eyes To See, Ears To Hear Peace Prayer Mission Group on the topic of how we in this church each name and understand God. We have had several conversations about this subject in my group, including the issue of naming God in gendered and human terms, and how to best serve our diverse congregation, including our youth.

Today I would like to touch on the idea of how we “see” God and Christ, and how that informs how we see our faith.

I will start by asking you to close your eyes for a moment and try to conjure up a vision of what you SEE when you think of God.

Now, open your eyes. Can anyone share in a few words what they saw?

How we see God is how we know God. How we know God is how we name God.

As Paul said in a different context in 1 Corinthians, "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child."

When I was little, as many do, I saw my God the way I saw my father. He was loving, kind, involved, but also rather strict and conservative. My parents were only 21 when they married, and as far as I can tell were quite unworldly. Both were raised in the Methodist church, I believe. When I was in first and second grades in Ohio, I attended the Evangelical United Brethren church, a significant influence in my early life. The difference between my father and God was that I knew that my dad loved me unconditionally, but I wasn't so sure about God. Sin was this big thing I didn't understand. I knew it was bad, and made God very angry – so angry he smote people, whole cities even. One night I was looking at our family Bible and ran across a Dore' engraving showing a huge devil whipping terrified people in a boat. I started crying "I don't want to go to Hell!" It took them a long time to calm me – I assume that they told me I wouldn't go to Hell because I was a good girl. Scary stuff for a seven-year old. My Evangelical Church also had several revivals over the years, and I loved those – singing, praying out loud, calls to the altar. I was saved at least twice, in all sincerity.

By the time I was twelve, I had saved my pennies to buy my own (King James) Bible for confirmation, and was baptized in a lake in a quarry. It was cold, I was uplifted, until my dad said I waded out of the water making as much noise as an elephant. Thanks, Dad!

As an aside, Seekers was the first place I actively heard the

King James version of the Bible disdained. I knew there were different versions of the Bible and that the KJV was not considered well-translated. But I happened to bring that Bible to church (the same one I had when I was baptized), and I got an eyeroll from the person who greeted me! But she also told me of other versions that were better translations, for which I was grateful.

Although I approached God with respect and a little fear and trembling (well, the adults were always saying "Fear the Lord!"), from the nursery I loved Jesus unreservedly. He was human. He was gentle and caring. He loved little children like me. He always tried to help people understand God and would teach that we should care about the poor, the homeless, the outcast. I grew up knowing that serving others was a basic way of living. I still feel that way. Now I know that serving others is serving God.

As I grew up, my parents moved several times, so we switched churches several times. We seemed to be trading up in class, finally ending up as Lutherans, beautiful tasteful churches, ritualized services, responsive readings. I don't remember any hellfire in the sermons. There was no shouting from the congregation.

In college I naturally found out about the Patriarchy (how Biblical!), feminist thought, and colonialism. My view of God was that I wasn't sure I believed in Him, but I still loved Jesus and all he stood for. My worldview started to expand, and I became more aware of alternatives to mainstream religion. I started reading spiritual writers, and understood that there was a universe of potential.

As an adult, I realized that I had a faith journey to undertake in learning about God. When I tried to meditate, often what I envisioned was light – illumination by fire, candle, giving insight. I had left regular churches, and my husband Roy and I began to search for an alternative to the

religion we had. I was looking for a place where everyone, including the most non-traditional folks and outcasts, were welcomed into a loving community. We found Seekers Church. And I realized what I had found was my vision of God as light.

Further work told me that I had a vision of God and Christ from my childhood that still informed my faith from the hymns I had most loved as a child – three of which we sing today.

My sense of God as entity was truest when I was in nature, trying to hear “a still small voice.” In many ways, I need a God who is ineffable, beyond words, beyond the universe, and NOT humanized or gendered. God within nature, the galaxies, the structure of atoms, God too big to describe. I have enough wisdom to know that God is beyond my human understanding – but there is generative power out there and in here that is creative and Creator. God is love. God is mystery and spirit. And God is available to everyone if only they know.

When my daughter April was eight years old, she went to a summer camp often attended by Seekers children, Camp Pecometh. On the ride home she seemed quiet yet perturbed. Finally she asked me if anyone who was not a Christian would go to Hell. I said that I actually didn't believe in Hell and what caused her to ask. She said that one of her counselors had told her that, and she was very worried. When she asked the counselor if her Jewish friends would go to Hell, or her beloved Buppy who is an atheist, the counselor said, “Every one who is not a Christian.” This naturally upset April very much. So on that trip we had a good conversation about God, how there were many ways and names to worship God. I finally pulled over the car, got a sheet of paper, and sketched out a space at the top for God, drew a line beneath which was the material world, and drew arrows going up from the world piercing the line and entering the God space. I pointed out each line with a different belief and even no belief, and said that each person reached God in his or her own way. She

looked at the drawing and said sagely, "Mom, are you telling me that you don't believe in God?" Obviously, my artwork did not live up to my meaning. But that sketch really was and is the way I see how humans in their various ways reach out to touch God.

As Anne Lamott says: "The first holy truth in God 101 is that men and women of true faith have always had to accept the mystery of God's identity and love and ways. I hate that, but it's the truth." (Source: Salon.com)

Jesus the man is the human component I need to allow me to identify with the God whose precepts I will follow, and who allows me to see the universal God, whatever name people use. He is also the man who has given us the blueprint of how to live in the world, how to save each other, and how to love God.

Anne Lamott again: "I have to put my energy into working to do what I believe Jesus instructs his followers, which is to care for the weakest, the least of his people, which includes prisoners and the poorest of the poor and the oldest and most exhausted." (Source: Beliefnet)

What we know as the divine Jesus is what lives as the Body of Christ through the believers on earth.

And my dear Anne Lamott: "I think Jesus is divine love manifest on earth, as it comes through the community of Christians." (Source: Christianity Today)

Laura Martin, whose poem is highlighted as our Reflection in this season's liturgy, also has another poem which I like:

"You are the light of the world."
He said it to fishermen and net-menders.
He said it to those who followed him
With nothing in their pockets,
With everything to lose

Already lost.

He said it to those who knew what it was
To be a little hungry,
And a lot sore from hard work.

He did not say it in Rome,
Say it in the banquet-halls
To neat applause
Between dinner and dessert.

Light is not light
If it takes away another's being,
If it locks doors and
Leaves the sick to cure themselves.

Light is not light
If it tells us to fear the foreigner,
To believe in cages and walls,
To put our faith in more weapons,
To cast out those who
Call God by another name.

And faith is not faith
If it does not tell the whole story,
And our part in it.

The names people use for God are the way they see God. In a congregation which is avowed to serve and love all, naming God in diverse ways shows that we can see God in multiple ways. That way lies empathy, compassion, and joy in our body of Christ.

Amen