

4/18/21 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME – PASTOR LOIS

Welcome! Greet one another, including on the screen – good to see one another. For the next three Sundays we'll be looking at the variety of images and names that our scriptures use to describe the attributes of God, Jesus and Holy Spirit. We know that as soon as we begin to use language to describe or explain God we're immediately out of our depth – there are no words that can adequately describe God. And yet, language, words are the tools that we have to communicate. Acknowledging that whatever words we use, they can never completely capture the essence of God, we will explore the various ways that God, Jesus and Spirit are talked about within scripture – with the hope that we can expand the images and names and ways we think about God to encourage us as our relationship with the Divine continues to grow.

What are the opportunities for celebration and service that you have to share this morning?

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Creator God, we come to you in prayer as we worship together. We praise you because you are our God and your steadfast love endures forever.

We bring you our prayers in the midst of our losses and grief. For those grieving the loss of dear ones, we pray your comfort and presence. Be with Sharon Boese and her family as they grieve their mother, Lenora Klassen's loss and celebrate her life. Be with Eulalia, Milton and Marvin as they grieve the passing of their brother-in-law, Ronal Unruh. We pray for those beyond our community, in our nation and in the world who are grieving the loss of loved ones to gun violence, to war, to covid, to starvation or strangling poverty. Our world seems to worship violence and violent power. We pray, God, for your upside down ways of life-giving justice and peace to prevail. We pray that your children all over the world would be convicted of the necessity to care for this earth, to live in ways that are sustainable and responsible for the well-being of all living things. We pray that the urge to dominate and lord over would be displaced by the urge to ensure that all life is viewed as a gift, valued and treasured.

We offer our prayers of intercession on behalf of dear ones in need of healing. Be with Steve and Sandy this week, with the doctors as they make plans and recommendations for his healing and recovery. Be with Larinda Amstutz as she faces surgery this week to repair broken bones. We continue to hold Dan and Joyce Bergen in our prayers as well as Gene and Cindy Hastings and others whose needs you know. You are the healer of our ills and you long for each of us to experience the fullness of joy in each day that you give us.

We thank you for this time, set aside to worship, to praise, to be challenged and encouraged on our faith journey. Come to us, be present with each of us, granting what our spirits need to hear, to learn, to follow you faithfully. And all God's people said... Amen.

Please stand as we offer our prayer of dedication – Provider God, let us never forget that every good gift comes from your hand. Give us grateful and generous hearts, eager to reflect the love you are in our giving. Amen.

“GOD OF MANY NAMES” – PASTOR CALEB

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever thought about how brash it is to pray and think that the source and power of the universe is giving undivided attention to *you*?

We wouldn't expect to be able to just call up the president of the United States or another important person on the phone. We don't expect access to extremely important people.

The Bible supports addressing God, approaching God with boldness, and attempting to talk about God. Sometimes that feels so normal to us that we don't even think about what we are doing.

At worst, they are words that we don't truly mean. We do it out of habit, because that's what we were taught. Or we pray in the presence of other people around the dinner table or in other settings really as a social practice.

You aren't really consciously addressing God, but instead finding prayer-words considered appropriate for the social occasion. I know I've experienced this. It's like asking someone, "how are you?" because that's a common way to start a conversation, but you don't really expect them to answer honestly.

For the next three weeks, I want us to step back and examine the names and images we use for God, and why we use them; what they mean for us. I hope that this will both draw us toward more intentional and deepened prayer life, but with a healthy dose of trepidation.

Today we will focus on God as creator, next week on God revealed in Jesus, and the final week on the Holy Spirit. Part of the idea of doing it this way comes from a page in the Worship Leader's supplement with the *Voices Together* hymnal that lists biblical images for each person of the Trinity.

Before we go further, we need to step into the biblical story – how does the ancient witness of scripture attempt to name God?

APPROACHING THE BURNING BUSH

When it comes to that question, I can't think of a better place to start than the story of Moses encountering God in the burning bush. This story has been on my mind naturally because it was the theme story for my ordination service.

Today I'm not interested in Moses or Moses' call, so much as the God that Moses meets.

Moses was born in Egypt. He was born to a family of Hebrew slaves, yet adopted by the royal family of Pharaoh. Because he murders an Egyptian man, Moses has to flee into exile in a neighboring country called Midian.

There Moses almost forgets his earlier life. He marries a local and starts working for her family as a shepherd.

One day he happens to be tending the sheep to the far side of the wilderness, beyond the desert. He comes to Mount Sinai (also called Horeb), the mountain of God. Moses sees a strange sight: a bush that is on fire, but does not burn up.

As he gets close to the bush, Moses hears the voice of God speaking to him. It is the same God as Moses' ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses is about as freaked out as any of us would be.

God speaks with a specific purpose. The children of Israel are slaves in Egypt, and God wants to use Moses to rescue them from slavery. Moses lives in a world where every people group has gods. The Egyptians had their own gods with different names. Pharaoh will ask, "So did Osiris send you here or was it Horus?"

Moses is rightly concerned that Pharaoh is hardly going to budge if he tries to show up on the authority of a previously unknown God of a slave people. So he asks God, "what's your name? I have to have a name. No one is going to listen if I say I had this burning bush experience and this burning bush hundreds of miles away sent me."

I AM

God's answer is not exactly what Moses is asking for. Because what Moses wants is a name that will be alongside all the names of the gods of Egypt.

No, God says, "I am who I am; I will be who I will be." (Ehyeh asher Ehyeh in Hebrew). "You can't tame me, you can't limit me, you can't claim to 'get' me, by giving me a name. I am the Nameless One, beyond any name."

This is not God remaining detached, far-off, and inaccessible. This One who simply *is*, is also the God who cares about a specific group of oppressed people and will fight for them. Already we have this tension – God is the incomprehensible source of the universe, and yet God has a stake in the stuff of our daily lives. God *cares*. And if need be, God will even take sides to defend the oppressed (there's a difference between saying that, and claiming God's on *my* side, though!)

"Say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you." In the end, God does in fact give Moses a name. That fact is obscured by the fact that the name appears in our English Bibles as "Lord," and we are used to using "God" and "Lord" interchangeably.

In Hebrew, however, it's a name, made up of four consonants: Y, H, W, H. No one knows for sure how it's pronounced, but the best guess is something like "Yahweh."

The name of "Yahweh" shows up in plenty of Biblical names, such as "Hallelu-YAH", Isa-YAH, Josi-YAH, Eli-JAH, or on the front such as Jehosphaphat, or Yehoshua (which is the source of Joshua and Jesus).

Even the name of Jesus is built off of this divine name.

You might be wondering, “God has a name? Why wasn’t I told this?” Already before the time of Jesus, Jews decided that this name was so holy, they would never say it out loud, and would instead substitute the word “LORD.”

This is why you never see the name YHWH directly in the New Testament – the New Testament writers were good Jews who weren’t about to pronounce it either. What is interesting is that the Exodus narrative connects the divine name to the Hebrew word that means “to be.”

When you do that, the literal meaning of “YHWH” becomes “*he causes to be.*” You have a name with the particularity of belonging to a specific people group, and yet this name simply names the mystery of the **Nameless One** who has brought into being all that is, the one who is the **Source** of all things.

SHADDAI AND OTHER NAMES

In Exodus 6:2, there is a striking verse in which God says, “I am the LORD [YHWH]. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name ‘The LORD’ [YHWH] I did not make myself known to them.”

The name translated as “God Almighty” is **El Shaddai**, or sometimes simply “Shaddai.”

The significance of the name is debated. It sounds like the Hebrew word for “breasts” and in Genesis is connected with the blessings of children. God shows up to both Abraham and Jacob as “Shaddai” promising many descendants.

When Jacob blesses his son Joseph, he says “by [Shaddai] who will bless you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lies beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb” (Gen 49:25).

Shaddai is the giver of life, and elsewhere in the Old Testament sometimes is the destroyer of life. It’s interesting to notice the name Shaddai showing up in diverse contexts, also expanding the Old Testament concept of God.

I’d like to quickly name other names and images for God found in the Bible. This is not at all meant to be exhaustive, but to see the diversity of language that we find.

We’ve talked about YHWH and Shaddai. There’s also “**Father**” that is especially common in the New Testament: “When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Rom 8:15-16).”

The idea of God as “creator” and “everlasting” as in Isaiah 40:28: “The Lord [YHWH] is the **everlasting God**, the **Creator** of the ends of the earth.”

You might be surprised to find some imagery of God as mother: “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you (Isa 66:13)” or (God speaking) “now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant” (Isa 42:14).

The common terms for God in the Bible are grammatically masculine and receive masculine pronouns. Masculine images and names predominate in the biblical text, maybe because the writings of the Bible come out of patriarchal cultures.

Yet feminine images and names can be found in scripture, you just have to look harder for them.

We relate to God out of our experience in the world, including our experience of human **mothers** and **fathers**. We have no other language to describe our connection with God except through metaphors drawn from what it means to be human, but we have to be careful not to take them too literally.

It seems we run against the limits of language; In calling God "rock" or "fortress" we don't mean that God literally is a slab of granite. Likewise God is beyond gender or metaphors of male and female, just as God is beyond any name, yet we need these different names.

I appreciate this quote from the early Christian writer Gregory of Nyssa:

“The divine power... though exalted far above our nature and inaccessible to all approach, like a tender mother who joins in the inarticulate utterances of her babe, gives to our human nature what it is capable of receiving... God both adapts to humanity and speaks in human language.”

This reminds me of my children who are too young to have an adult understanding of who their parents are, but yet have an authentic relationship with us through the experience they do have of us.

Some additional names for God include “the Most High” or “refuge.” The first verses of Psalm 91 are remarkable for combining many different names and images, including the divine name, the Most High, Shaddai, refuge, fortress, and the image of a mother bird.

Hagar the mother of Ishael gave God the name “El Roi,” the God who sees.

A number of passages use the image of Rock, such as this verse from Deuteronomy 32:18: “You were unmindful of the **Rock** that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth.”

We have God as a consuming fire in Hebrews, and much more familiar to us, God as love in 1 John.

OUR NAMES AND IMAGES FOR GOD

It's important for us to be mindful of our own God-concepts which are fed by the names and images we use for God.

All of us have a God-concept, and hopefully our God-concept comes out of the ways God is revealed in scripture, in the Christian tradition, and most especially in Jesus.

But we also have to remember that God is not what the best brains in the world can comprehend. God speaks human language like Gregory of Nyssa was saying.

We might change in how we experience and name God, but, of course, that **isn't** saying God has changed, only our understanding.

Another way to say it is that names and images connect us to God in our humanity and in our experience as people living in bodies in this physical world. But no name or image can tell God's full story. There is no name that can fully name God's story.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

Consider these questions for reflection for your own life of faith:

1. What names and images for God have shaped you?

Various images and names have been meaningful to me.

- Rock or solid ground
- Source -- similar to the idea of being
- A guide who is always present with me
- Father -- granting that I have a positive relationship with my dad and as a male, I feel the longing for an older male guide which makes it a natural image for me.
- Lord -- while it creates problems for some because of its association with slavery. The Bible uses this word to challenge the claims of any human ruler to be "Lord." For me, to call God "Lord" is a way of surrendering and letting go, being OK with not being in control, as I am not "Lord."

2. How have these names and images affected your relationship with God?

Do they draw you closer to God or make God distant? Is God out to punish you for infractions of rules or does God offer grace and love, able to embrace you even when you have done wrong? Do your images foster intimacy and trust or create a sense of fear and shame?

3. Who taught you your predominant images?

Have you had any "burning bush" experiences of your own, or did your go-to images come from parents and teachers?

4. Do you assume that you "get" God or can you allow God to be mystery?

What might it be like in prayer to hold an awareness that you really don't understand the one you are directing your prayer to?

Here's yet another question:

Some Christians feel it is important to imitate biblical language as closely as possible to make sure you "get it right." Others see the Bible giving examples of how to speak to God and about God, but that we have a creative license to find fresh words and images that communicate meaningfully for our lives today.

What do you think about that?

Maybe you will confirm the names and images you already use. Continue speaking to God with boldness in prayer.

Maybe you will find permission to qualify or expand these names and images.

Maybe you need to confess putting God in a box and need to find ways to embrace God's mystery.

Next week, we will continue with names and images for Jesus, and the third week conclude with names and images for the Holy Spirit.

RELEASING HYMNAL A WORSHIP BOOK

This past year has been a year of many transitions. One of these is transitioning to a new hymnal, Voices Together. We have had the new hymnals for a while now, but have wanted to wait with this transition until we have been able to sing as a congregation again.

This Sunday is our last using the blue hymnals in the pews.

Next Sunday we will be outdoors and will continue to sing songs from the blue hymnals.

Then, our first Sunday with the new Voices Together hymnals will be May 2. This transition brings anticipation and excitement with the opportunity to learn new songs. It also brings a sense of loss.

Most of the songs we commonly sing are included in the new collection, but there are a few that are not. We've tried to include some of these in the past months.

Our first hymn today "Come thou almighty King" is not in the new collection, and in a bit we will also sing two more outside that are not in the new collection.

As we go outside, you are invited to take a copy of the blue hymnal with you. You may take it home or drop it off at [name location].

Since we don't have this kind of change every day, it is important to acknowledge this transition in prayer. Please pray with me:

Eternal God, your steadfast love is everlasting. You have met your people in worship and song for generations. You have sustained this community in this generation through the blue hymnals

We thank you for melodies and lyrics that have expressed our joy and carried us through hard times.

We thank you for Scripture and prayer, spoken and sung, that have shaped the seasons and years.

We thank you for the familiar weight in our hands that reminds us of the power of singing together to you.

Some songs remain part of our worship in new hymnals. Other songs from the blue books continue to echo in our hearts.

With gratitude and a sense of loss, we release these books from this space.

We acknowledge that all of these familiar songs as well as new songs are but human echoes of your song that is eternal from age to age. Amen

BENEDICTION

Now may the God of peace, the One who is, will be, and brings all things into being, the One who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, make us complete in everything good so that we may do God's will, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever