

## “SPEAKING OF GOD”

Genesis 1:27-27; Psalm 89:8-9, 10b, 13-14; Isaiah 6:1-5; Matthew 28:16-20; Hosea 11:1-4

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Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins

Westminster Presbyterian Church

I forget sometimes, because I've been doing this for quite a while now, what an audacious thing preaching is. Getting up, week after week, to talk about God. Trying to speak, with some degree of confidence, about the eternal Creator of the universe. To say something about what God is like, what God asks of us, what it means to say that we human beings are made “in the image of God.” Or, on occasion, to ask things like “why is God letting this happen?” or “how can this be true?” or “what does this mean???”

Talking about God is inherently problematic, because God is *Mystery*. God is beyond our sight and touch, but that's only part of why God is mysterious and in some ways unknowable to us mere humans. What do we know about holiness, glory, eternity? We can't fully grasp who God is; we don't know the mind of God. To speak of the infinite, the sacred, the source of all life, the creative force behind the universe - this is an enormous undertaking. Nobody could possibly do justice to any of that in the confines of human language. Attempting to do so is arguably the greatest presumption.

And yet... central to faith is the conviction that God has revealed Godself to us humans – in the creation, in the scriptures, in the person of Jesus, through God's Spirit in and among us - and that therefore, we *can* and do know something of God. Our understanding is limited, for sure, but it's real.

What's more, we are *asked* to talk about God. Not just preachers, but all believers. The psalms urge people of faith to “tell of God's goodness” and “make known” God's deeds. Jesus tells his friends they are to be witnesses, and “go make disciples.” The testimonies of Jesus' earliest followers were the means by which the church grew.

Still, however real our faith and our sense of calling, when we talk about God, we are aware that we're speaking about Mystery we don't fully comprehend. And therein are pitfalls.

One is that we lean so far into the mystery of God that we have nothing helpful to say, that we relinquish the possibility – maybe even the desire - to learn or know more. Trinity Sunday can be a day for that: we don't understand this doctrine, but that's precisely the point - God is a mystery.

Now, “I don't know” is a fine and truthful answer, often; sometimes we do have to accept that there's stuff we will never know. But “we can't fully know God” is not the same as “we know nothing about God,” or “let's not even try to understand.” Leaning too far into this notion of mystery can amount to opting out of serious engagement with scripture, with hard questions, with the issues of our day, with our own calling. It can keep us from spiritual growth. It can become an excuse for not forming or holding to or acting on any convictions. It can hold us back from sharing

what we have experienced of God's just and generous love. It can become a reason not to speak of God at all.

On the other hand, discomfort with the whole *idea* of mystery presents another pitfall: we might want to pin down that mystery, and express it in precise, specific words. Trinity Sunday is a day for that, too: this is how we declare Christian faith, that we believe in "one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." It's referred to as "the Trinitarian formula," it dates back probably to the second century, and is used in baptism in nearly all Christian churches. It's rich with theological ideas and tradition and history.

But the Trinitarian formula is also, for many, well, merely a formula, less an expression of mystery than a definitive way to speak of God. It becomes an article of belief not to be questioned but simply to be accepted, recited, defended. And the difficulties in speaking of mystery evaporate, because we have been given the "right" words.

But the mysteries don't go away, not really. As much as I love the theological richness of the doctrine of the Trinity, I think it's problematic to believe that any formula for speaking of – and thinking about – God is adequate. We run the risk of forgetting that our *words for God* are not God. (Wil Gafney) God is bigger than human concepts and language.

I'm sure most of us have encountered those who've insisted on one or two or a few ways to speak about God. Or perhaps we've encountered our own discomfort, when hearing God spoken of in unfamiliar or jarring ways. We aren't used to hearing God referred to as "Mother," or "the Great Spirit," as in some indigenous traditions. Referring to Jesus as our "Brother" or the Holy Spirit as "She" might not be what we grew up hearing.

But here's the thing. The Bible doesn't give us one definitive way to speak of God. Certainly there's a preponderance of masculine language but it's not at all hard to discover that the scriptures include lots ways to speak of God. They give us the words of many different people striving to put into words their particular experiences of God.

In parts of the Hebrew scriptures, the word for God is a plural word, and in Genesis 1 we have God saying, "Let us make humans in our image, male and female...." In light of that, some have suggested that "they" could be a very appropriate pronoun to use for God. In the Psalms and elsewhere "the Lord of Hosts" describes a warrior God, leading and defending his people. Isaiah describes his vision of God as an experience of glory, light, mystery, power, and utter holiness that we can hardly imagine. In contrast, Jesus' life shows us God as one of us, a self-giving, self-sacrificing, suffering God.

Jesus refers to God as "Father" and also with the more intimate term "Abba" (something like "papa"). The Old Testament doesn't use "Father" much to refer to God, but in Deuteronomy 32, God is referred to as "the Father of his people" and then just a few verses on as "the One who gave birth to them." The Hebrew word for "compassion," used often for God, is closely related to the word for "womb." And in Hosea, we have that tender mothering image of God holding, caressing, and feeding her child, to who she is connected by cords of human love and kindness.

Perhaps most puzzling of all – if you stop and think about it for five minutes - is that God is also referred to as Rock, Fortress, Shelter, and Fountain, among other non-human images; and the Spirit is manifest as Wind, Fire, and a Dove. I find all those images beautiful and meaningful, but I'm not sure how to put them together with "let us make humans in our image."

We have a calling to speak of God and to share the good news of God's love in the world. We also speak *to* God, and we speak of God to one another - and to ourselves. We have a need for that – our words are part of our searching to know God. Our words for God help us pass on the faith to our children. But how we speak of God matters. How we talk about God shapes how we think about God, and how we think about God has a *lot* to do with how we understand ourselves. If we see God as legalistic and demanding, we are likely to be legalistic and demanding. A sense that God is distant and "other" gives us a different worldview than a conviction that God is near and shares our sorrow. If male-ness is an essential characteristic of God, it becomes more difficult to see the image of God in women and girls.

Some of the ways we've been used to speaking and thinking of God give us a one-dimensional, limited, static God. Some of them also imagine a hierarchical universe dominated by a coercive deity. That's not just inconsistent with the larger vision of the Bible, it's also reflected in structures of church and society that do harm to the less powerful. We can look for language that offers a different vision, for example, these trinitarian expressions from Hebrew scholar Wil Gafney: Sovereign, Savior, and Shelter. Author, Word, and Translator. Life, Liberation, and Love. They don't feel as familiar as, and probably can't ever replace, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... but they are drawn from Biblical texts and traditions. (Gafney, p.199) And they invite us to think of God in more expansive ways.

The richness of the scriptures makes it both more challenging to speak of God – because there's no single, simple formula – and at the same time more freeing, as it enlarges both our vocabulary and our understanding.

Should we go on speaking of God? Yes! Doing so, can we bold and audacious and aware of our calling, and at the same time humble and open and aware of our limitations? I hope so. I think so. The mystery of God, who is holy and other, and also loving and near, beckons us. Not to definition and dogma, but to ever-growing understanding and ever-deepening relationship. And to the amazing realities of divine creativity, love, and grace which simply cannot be kept quiet. Amen.

Resources:

Debie Thomas, "Too much mystery?" in *The Christian Century*, June 2024

Wil Gafney, *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church*

Wil Gafney, "Hosea's Mothering God" <https://www.wilgafney.com/2013/08/04/hoseas-mothering-god-back-to-egypt/>

Carter Heyward, *The Seven Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism*