

The great mystical poet Jelaluddin Rumi wrote that:  
God has said,

“The images that come with human language do not correspond to me,  
but those who love words must use them to come near.”

Humanity’s longing to come near to God has led each generation, in one way or another, to ask the same questions. We search for the words to describe the what, how, why, when and who of the Divine. Our response to many of these questions are reflected in the names we attribute to God, and there are many. I asked Elizabeth if we could look again at the name placards she made for Easter morning. I found it so helpful to be visually reminded that the Bible has many different ways of naming the Holy.

When we name God the Good Shepherd, the Creator, the Almighty Arbitrator, the Loving Father or Loving Mother - those names shape not only what we imagine God to be. They shape how we imagine ourselves to be as well. We become the sheep in need of care and protection, the creatures in praise of life bestowed upon us. We become those who have strayed and are in need of correction, and the children who learn and grow in relationship to their guardians.

The high priests knew the power of naming when they asked Peter by what name he had healed a man who had been paralyzed since birth. Prestige, power, authority - these are the things the high priests associated with certain names. And there were only certain names (those being of the Roman elite) that one could raise above others. But Peter also knew that there was power in naming a thing, and so he answered the high priests’ question by saying that this man “was healed by the authority of Jesus of Nazareth, *the Anointed One*. The same one whom you crucified and whom God raised from the dead.” For Peter, and the people of Israel, the title Anointed One carried the heaviest weight of authority. And just to put an exclamation point on it, Peter declares “There is no one else who can rescue us,” and there is no other name under heaven given to any human by whom we may be rescued.”

In the ground-breaking book She Who Is, a work of scholarship particularly concerned with how feminine images inform our language about God, another “Elizabeth” theologian Elizabeth Johnson says that “...the way in which a faith

community shapes language about God implicitly represents what it takes to be the highest good, the profoundest truth, the most appealing beauty. Such speaking,” she says “in turn, powerfully molds the corporate identity of the community and direct praxis.”

Let me share a folk story with you that fleshes out this idea a bit more.

In an ancient land far away, there was a wise and just Queen named Amara. Queen Amara ruled over a prosperous kingdom, and her people lived in harmony and peace. However, the queen was troubled by a question that had been passed down through generations: What is the true name of God?

Determined to solve this mystery, Queen Amara called upon the kingdom's most learned scholars, priests, and philosophers to gather at the royal palace. For days, they debated and deliberated, searching ancient texts and scriptures for clues. But the true name of God remained elusive.

One night, as Queen Amara sat alone in her chambers, deep in thought, a gentle voice spoke to her. "Seek not the name of God in words. Seek the name of God in deeds. For God's true name is written in the kindness of your heart, the compassion in your actions, and the love you show to others."

Moved by these words, Queen Amara realized that the true name of God was not a word to be spoken but a way of living. She called her people together and shared this revelation with them, and from that day on, the people understood *that the true name of God was to be found in their everyday actions and interactions.*

The challenge of using imaginative language, as Rumi suggests, is that while it helps us come nearer to God, it does not really do God justice. It's hard to put words to what is a mystery. And then there's the problem with our images also inadvertently separating us from the Divine. Theologian Martin Buber is famous for his idea that we might talk of God and ourselves in terms of "I" and "Thou" with the essential character of "I-Thou" being the melting of the in between. For Buber, the encounter of the two makes them one. A complete encounter, according to Buber, leaves one seeing every other being (nature, animals, people) as ourselves which makes it easier to feel affection for everyone and everything,

and to have a sense of loving responsibility for the whole course of the world. So too, our encounters with the Divine draw us *into* the Divine and make us one with God. This transformation, Buber tells us, is divine revelation. It is salvation.

We are drawn closer to God and find life in the name of Jesus the Christ as we see through his actions and reactions a life that could mirror our own. Any distance between ourselves and the Divine melts as we become one, recognizing ourselves in Christ who has known grief and suffering; who has been betrayed by his closest companions. We can see ourselves in the Christ, whose compassion and love have been tested by those who would malign and abuse. In the one who was killed for his commitment to love. The one who was raised from all of these deaths to live yet again. This One is the Thou that becomes the I, the we.

Elizabeth Johnson provides us the title for our sermon this morning. Putting a spin on a phrase attributed to Martin Luther, the Protestant Reformer, Johnson suggests that “God is that on which you lean your heart.” The picture on the front of the bulletin is the closest image I could find to this sentiment of leaning one’s heart on another.

This might be a silly example to use, but the idea of leaning our hearts on another made me think about the two kids we adopted during the pandemic. One has an independence streak and doesn’t listen very well and the other will rush to you and lick your face if you start to cry. I’m speaking, of course, about our dogs Daisy and Percy. Every night when it’s time for bed, Percy tucks herself under my right arm and rests against my side to sleep. Daisy burrows under the blankets and settles near my feet. They lean into me for comfort, knowing quite well that if they misbehave (and it’s always Percy who gets into trouble) I will reprimand them, but I will also love them and try to help them feel safe. Yes, I realize that in this example I am placing myself in the role of God, but that is only the case when it comes to “the girls” as we call them. I don’t think of myself as God, just as the one on whom these furry friends often lean their hearts. And upon whom I lean mine.

Whatever image or word you use to draw near to the Divine mystery, the important part is the process of encountering that truth, that wisdom, that presence fully, and resting one's hearts there both in times of trouble and in times of great joy.

“The images that come with [our] human language do not correspond to [God],  
but those who love words must use them to come near.”

May you find that place, that word, that image that encounter, and lean your heart there. Amen.