

## **What we're (not) talking about, when we're talking about God**

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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UCV

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*Meditation:*

### ***The Nature of God*** (from Moses Maimonides, 12<sup>th</sup> century)

A person may think that God is an old man with white hair, sitting on a wondrous throne of fire that glitters with countless sparks, as the Bible states: “The Ancient of Days sits, the hair on his head like clean fleece, his throne—flames of fire.” Imagining this and similar fantasies, you fall into one of the traps that destroys faith. Your awe of God is limited by your imagination.

But if you know God's oneness, you know the divine is devoid of bodily categories—these can never be applied to God. Then you wonder, astonished: Who am I?

I am a mustard seed in the middle of the sphere of the moon, which itself is a mustard seed within the next sphere. So it is with that sphere and all it contains in relation to the next. So it is with all the spheres—one inside the other—and all of them a mustard seed within the further expanses. And all of these are a mustard seed within the further expanses.

And thus, your awe is invigorated, the love in your soul expands.

*Sermon:*

Imagine the following scene with me: a quiet evening stretches before us, and we're comfortably settling down into the stable; we're a group of horses and we've had a good day — fleet hooped galloping in the nearby meadows, pelts alive and shining after a vigorous brushing down, bellies full of first rate oats and fresh water. We're standing amiably side-by-side in our stalls, and as these things happen, we start talking about god.

“A Clydesdale,” says one, “he's got to be like a Clydesdale that can pull a great wagon, and when he strides, the earth trembles under his girth and power.” “No,” says another swishing her tail, “she's a mighty mare—fertile mother of healthy colts who fill the fields with gladness.” From a nearby stall, a hoof stamps the timber floor—“Nonsense! God's the swift running thoroughbred thundering round the track in glory.” Another spits the hay he's been chewing and whinnies: “Not the way I see it. For my money, the Almighty's a quarter horse—lighting fast off its haunches, veers on a dime, can run the cows ragged, and when its rider ropes a steer and slips the knot over the pommel of the saddle—nothing can move god from its stance.”

And so the conversation flows and ebbs into the night: someone sees a dappled Appaloosa, another a slender necked Arabian, another one opts for the haughty, high stepping Lippizaner...and on and on it goes. Can't you just hear it? Horses talking about god? Well, 2500 years ago, so did the ancient Greek philosopher Xenophanes:

If horses, he wrote, had hands  
And could paint with their hands and accomplish such works as men do,  
Horses...would draw the figures of the gods as similar to horses  
And they would make the bodies  
Of such a sort as the form they themselves have.

And then, continues Xenophanes: mortals suppose that gods are born, wear their own clothes and have a voice and body.

Biographies and descriptions of the gods are almost as old as the human race. Down through the millennia, gods have served many human purposes: they have promised an afterlife, they have explained the weather and natural cataclysms, revealed why there is evil in the world, and taken sides against enemies. As well, and perhaps most important, a central part of their appeal has been the achievement of filling the world with value and purpose, a heart-felt, imaginative move that includes identifying qualities we most deeply esteem and to which we aspire and then feel a nagging, ineradicable duty to achieve both individually and as a society.

And thus the conversation, of the horses; note the way our stable of horses ascribed to their gods qualities they most admire in themselves: the strength of the draft horse, the fertility of the mare, the speed of the thoroughbred, the quicksilver manoeuvrability and stubborn resolve of the quarter horse. They can't help using their own bodies to describe what fills them with respect and awe.

And so we, horses and humans, have been doing, for good and ill, down to this very day.

Mid week, I found myself asking: Epperson, why on earth did you think you should give this sermon? The following three notions then rose to my mind:

*The first is sympathetic imagination.* That is, the human family has had very good reasons for talking about, needing and worshipping gods. Living out a life in this world is challenging and complicated. With all its glory, it's also been shot through with tragedy, humiliation, uncertainty, loss and violence down through the ages. Sacred narratives—like the Exodus account of the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt—have been a bedrock source of solace and defiance for desperate people. Believing that a god knows them, suffers

with them, hears their cries, and would lead them out from slavery to a promised land of freedom has triggered slaves revolts and inspired and sustained movements for civil and human rights around the world.

I know the holiday season's over, but let's not forget *yet* that Miriam, or Mary, in response to conceiving a child, sang out to her God: "He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty." And it was that son of Miriam, the prophet from Nazareth, who launched his ministry with these words: "He (that is God) has sent me to proclaim release for the captives...to set at liberty those who are oppressed."

Have we forgotten this part of the Christmas story? Do we think these words, this passion for liberation and justice, is a minor, forgettable theme in the biography of god? (If so, perhaps that says more about us and our times than it does of those who still turn to these words in hope and resolve.)

Let me go a bit further with this. There's a British TV series called *Rev*; a hapless, young Anglican priest serves an impoverished, oddball parish in South London. It's Good Friday. (I've never understood why Christians call it Good Friday—Jesus gets crucified and in agony on the cross calls out: My God, why have you forsaken me? Seems like it should be called Bad Friday; but I digress...)

It's Good Friday, early morning, South London, and everything's gone smash in the life of the vicar Rev. Adam Smallbone. His parish is going to be shut down for lack of attendance and funds. He's up on disciplinary charges; some think he's too liberal, others not hip enough, and he's losing his faith altogether. Alone, he's carrying a full size wooden cross for another vicar's Easter play and hauls it up to a neglected, litter strewn corner of a public park. He sets the cross against a sign board and then in a bout of goofy crazy despair starts singing and dancing "The Lord of the Dance."

An uninvited guest appears—a long haired, grizzled, trampy kind of guy in a toque with a beer can in hand who joins in the dancing and singing. "Ah, I like your dancing," says the man. The embarrassed vicar stops and sits on the bench. The older man sits as well, sizes up the priest who then confesses: "I'm trying to keep something alive, but I don't think I can do it." In response, the older fellow begins to dispense clichés: "a bird in the hand... can't make an

omelette without breaking eggs, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, you buy cheap, you buy twice," etc. The Rev can't believe it: he's in the pits and now stuck with this guy and his penny farthing wisdom, when, suddenly, everything goes still: the man in the toque looks squarely at the Rev and says: "Adam, Adam, we all have our crosses to bear." He places his hand on the Rev's shoulder, and says: "I understand, Adam, I'll *always* be here." He smiles, then rises from the bench and leaves the frame. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Yo-UYCoZ9o>)

If we don't feel and understand these things—the crushing oppression of a people or a young person's solitary despair—and the solace and compassion that can come unbidden, in a moment of grace, hope beyond hope—then I think we hardly know what we're talking about when we're talking about god with a fair number of people in this world. A belief in a god is one, very human expression of a worldview that holds that inherent, objective value permeates everything, that the universe and its creatures are awe-inspiring, and that human life has purpose and participates in the very order of the cosmos. For those who believe, a god can provide and affirm this perception of value, the responsibilities of life, the wonders of the universe and it can bring personal, intimate, moving comfort and inspiration in times of despair. And I'm not going to go out of my way to argue someone out of that belief, especially if it comes personified in the form of a grizzled tramp in a littered corner of a public park on a Good Friday morning. While I'm not asking anyone to check their brain, or their pain, at the door of this Sanctuary, I think it's good for us to exercise some sympathetic imagination.

Which brings me to the next reason I'm giving this sermon: *I just don't want us to say unnecessarily stupid things*. A number of years ago, someone pressed Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion* in my hands, and said read it! Well, I did, and though it belongs in our library, I was mortified by what I read.

Dawkins demolishes what he calls god, and claims this is the "god" that has defined religious belief through history and defines it around the world today. But there's a problem here. Dawkins' god is a straw man—that is, he refutes belief in god, by offering a god his opponents don't believe in or worship. The god that contemporary mass media atheists attack is a sort of superhero—that is, he's the most powerful being in the universe or outside it who can do anything he likes to the universe, including miraculously creating it. Taking apart this god isn't that taxing: one could say there's no compelling scientific evidence for such a being and we don't need this hypothesis to explain how the world works.

Some may, even today, believe in this sort of superhero deity; but throughout history, the fact is very different versions of god have been the center of devotional, artistic, moral and intellectual life. That means Dawkins and his cohort, whether they know it or not, don't really know what religious believers have meant and mean when they use the word "God." They haven't put in the work to truly understand and know, and I find that an embarrassing lack of curiosity in those who are supposed to care deeply about evidence. (\*see postscript)

The evidence is there. If we'd care enough to look and listen, we can find it in great works of theology, literature, the arts and music. If philosophical theology isn't our bag, we could turn to the wildly generous verse of the 14<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet Hafiz, and to writings like those of 16<sup>th</sup> century Jewish mystic and theologian Moses Cordovero. There's a sampler printed in our orders of service. I invite you to follow along as I read the Hafiz poems and the selection: *The Stone and Divinity* by Moses Cordovero.

*Poems from Hafiz* (14<sup>th</sup> century, renditions by Daniel Landinsky)

### *Where is the Door to the Tavern?*

Where is the door to God?  
In the sound of the barking dog,  
In the ring of the hammer,  
In the drop of rain,  
in the face of  
Everyone  
I see.

### *And Then You Are*

And then You are like this:  
A small bird decorated  
With orange patches of light  
Waving its wings near my window,  
Encouraging me with all of existence's love—  
To dance.  
And then you are...  
The firmament

That spins at the end of a string in Your hand  
That You offer to mine saying,  
“Did you drop this—surely  
This is yours.”  
And then You are, O then You are:  
The Beloved of every creature  
Revealed with such grandeur—bursting  
From each cell in my body,  
I kneel, I laugh,  
I weep, I sing,  
I sing.

### ***Buttering the Sky***

Slipping  
On my shoes,  
Boiling the water,  
Toasting the bread,  
Buttering the sky:  
That should be enough contact  
With God in one day  
To make anyone  
Crazy.

### *The Stone and Divinity* (from Moses Cordevero, 16<sup>th</sup> century)

The essence of divinity is found in every single thing—nothing but it exists. Since it causes everything to be...It enlivens them, Its existence exists in each and every thing....Let God be solely God. If you suppose It emanates until a certain point, and that from that point on is outside it...God forbid!...Do not say, “*That* is a stone and not God.” God forbid! Rather, all existence is God, and the stone is a thing pervaded by divinity.

Here are poetic expressions of that which is worshiped and experienced by countless people, across continents and down through the centuries—a vision of that which fills the universe and our short lives with value, purpose and a kind of ecstatic immediacy, wonder and aliveness. So if we’re going to talk about God, I’d propose that we take some time, track down compelling sources, and, exercising some imaginative sympathy, try to find out what believing people are really talking about when they use the word and try to convey the experience of what they call God.

One more reason for this sermon. *After about a sixty year hiatus, god's making something of a comeback in the Unitarian Universalist world.* It's showing up increasingly in survey data, in ritual and liturgy in our congregations and ministerial gatherings, and in the pained expressions of members who want nothing to do with it. I'm not talking about the return of a supernatural being somewhere out there that unilaterally sets aside the laws of nature, or intentionally intercedes in human affairs. And I've come to think my prayers are not going to reach the ears of that which then decides to help me find my lost keys, turn aside a tsunami, ensure a bumper crop of wheat in Saskatchewan, or disappear the engines of war. (I wish!)

But think about what's happening: philosophers saying that another word for God is Nature with a capital N; First Nations elders exclaiming: "everything is alive!"; scientists expressing awe when encountering the astounding complexity of atomic particles, and a sense of reverent wonder that the laws governing everything in the vastness of space and in the minutiae of existence are delicately interwoven. "There is a grandeur in this view of life," wrote Darwin, "...that from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved." Then add the gnawing sense of emptiness and dis-ease as social, economic and emotional conditions increasingly are assaulted by consumerist materialism, naked inequality, outright fraud and reductive models of the human psyche—combine all that and more, and you have conditions ripe for the return of the repressed—of people tuning in for signals of transcendence. You have Unitarians singing "Spirit of Life Come Unto Me!" and "Life is a Riddle and a Mystery," and here we are, the Sources of our faith tradition, affirming "direct experience of that mystery and wonder which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life."

*What are we talking about, when we're talking about God?* It's complicated isn't it? Many of us grew up in other churches and temples; some of us are still more than a little god-haunted, aren't we? The hulls of our ships are still encrusted with left-over barnacles of belief and sentiment about the Almighty. And what do we do with them? Some of you were here with candles and carols on Christmas Eve. And there was Elliott and Steven leading the congregation in singing: "glory to god on high" and "silent night, holy night, son of god, love's pure light."

Was that just a show we put on, a rousing rendition of an annual ritual with nothing but nostalgic cultural content and an empty manger at its heart? Or was there more to it than that? Something having to do with the human spirit captured in the words of A. Powell Davies who

said: “whenever we feel pessimistic concerning the future of humanity upon this troubled planet, we can always remember this: that with all our fears and failings, we have yet somehow managed to put the brightest of festivals in the darkest part of the year.... When the harshest and bleakest of seasons is upon us, we turn to gentleness, kindness and forbearance.

*What are we talking about, when we’re talking about God, (or not?!) Consider this in closing:*

There are many notes on a piano.

They can be played in major and minor keys.

Tunes played upon it can be simple and uncomplicated...

Atonal and bristling with complexity...

Or as glorious, baroque fantasias...

The possibilities are endless.

It makes for the glory, beauty, tragedy and art of music.

*What are we talking about, when we’re talking about God?*

I’ve begun the 7<sup>th</sup> decade of my life. I’ve been listening, thinking, and feeling my way toward and away from and back again and away from and back again to that transcendent mystery and wonder at the heart of existence; I will, no doubt, until I breathe my last...

It’s broken my heart, shattered my dreams, and deepened and enlivened and made more meaningful everything in and around me.

I’ll just end now with the Hafiz poem “Buttering the Sky”:

Slipping  
On my shoes,  
Boiling the water,  
Toasting the bread,  
Buttering the sky:  
That should be enough contact  
With God in one day  
To make anyone  
Crazy.

\* (In both East and West, classical religious traditions have claimed that God is the unconditioned cause of reality from the beginning to the end of time. Understood this way, one can't even say that God "exists" in the sense that my bicycle or electrons, or superhero gods exist. In this view, that spans East and West and goes back millennia, God is ultimately that which grounds the existence of everything, making it possible, sustaining it through time, unifying it, giving it actuality. God is the condition of the possibility of anything existing. In short, God isn't just one very impressive thing among others; rather, God is the answer to the question of why there's existence and consciousness at all.

What are we talking about when we're talking about God? Let's avoid the fallacy of the straw man, superhero god argument. We may object to this "light-of-being-itself" kind of God and this way of thinking and belief; we may find it woolly headed, and claim only seminary eggheads and a handful of religious people take this seriously. But how would we really know whether our objections and suppositions are warranted?

Come to think of it, how would we really know what caused the global financial meltdown of 2007-08? Content with just saying it's too complicated, and leave it to the tender mercies of Wall Street and the sharks still swimming there? (Which is exactly what they want!) Or do we, instead, seek out the best and most critically acclaimed books, articles and experts in the field on the subject, read and digest what they say, and then try to come to our own reasonably well-informed conclusions?

Here's a New Year's resolution: Let's try to avoid saying unnecessarily uninformed things about god (in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Vedantic and Bhaktic Hinduism, Sikhism, various late antique paganisms, Mahayana Buddhism and Taoism and so on). We could start by reading David Bentley Hart's *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness and Bliss*. Though sometimes it reads like parsing the convolutions of credit default swaps, and we may not agree with him, it's the real thing, and Hart tries to provide a deeply informed account of God and the religious temperament worth engaging and grappling and trying to understand. Oliver Burkeman of the *Guardian* called it "the one theology book all atheists really should read." see *Guardian*, January 14, 2014)