

Who do you *sing* that I am?

Sarah Johnson

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Summer Worship 2011: How can I keep from singing?

“God of many names” *Hymnal 77*, Exodus 3:13-15, Isaiah 42:13-15, excerpts from John 6-15, Mark 8:27-30

Pop Quiz

What better way to celebrate a long weekend than with a pop quiz? Before we begin you should know that: 1) this is a closed book exam, and 2) everyone, young and old, is encouraged to participate by calling out answers. Here we go:

What images of God have we encountered so far in worship this morning?

Most High	Holy One	God of Abraham, Isaac and	Moving
Great Sovereign	Untamed	Jacob	Endlessly becoming
Lord	Caller	Soldier	Hovering wings
King	Home	Warrior	Womb and birth of time
Above	Source of light	Woman in labour	Breath of life
Shield	Shepherd	Bread of life	Love
Defender	Maker of peace	Good Shepherd	God of Jewish faith
Ancient of Days	Healer	Resurrection and the life	Joy of Miriam and Moses
Robe is of Light	Mother	Light of the world	Rabbi of the Poor
Thunderclouds	Father	Gate for the sheep	Crucified
Dark	Friend	Way and truth and life	Alive forever
Maker	One	Vine	God of wounded hands
Defender	I am who I am	Messiah	Web and loom of love
Redeemer	God of our ancestors	Jesus	Carpenter of new creation
Friend		God of many names	

Scripture and song of the church are collections of images of God

These are just a few of the many images of God we have encountered this morning. And this morning, we have only encountered a fraction of the overwhelming variety of ways God is imaged in scripture and song.

“What is your name?” Moses asks God.¹ “Who do you say that I am?” asks Jesus.² We have so many answers to these questions in scripture, a few of which we heard this morning:

“I am who I am.”³

“The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”⁴

“The good shepherd, the gate for the sheep, the vine.”⁵

“The Messiah.”⁶

¹ Exodus 3:13

² Mark 8:29

³ Exodus 3:14

⁴ Exodus 3:15

⁵ John 1-:11, John 10:7, John 15:5.

⁶ Mark 8:29

The Bible is a collection of images of God, conveyed through story and poem and song, gathered over millennia from different cultures and traditions. What an amazing gift! What an amazing answer to our question to God: “What is your name?” And God’s question to us: “Who do you say that I am?”

This summer we are expanding Jesus’ question: “Who do you say that I am?” We are also asking: “Who do you *sing* that I am?” The song of the church is a collection of images of God, conveyed through story and poem and music, gathered over millennia from different cultures and traditions. What an amazing gift! What an amazing answer to our question to God: “What is your name?” And God’s question to us: “Who do you say that I am?”

The idea of a many imaged God is very familiar. I hear that a few years ago the summer worship series explored different images of God. Ellen reflected on the image of God as mother a few weeks ago. I remember one of the first assignments in Grade 7 Religious Studies at the Mennonite high school I attended was to draw an image of God. Maybe some of you who are children, or children at heart, want to try this this morning on a corner of your bulletin. In the twenty-first century, “God of many names” is Sunday School 101 material.

Images of God are powerful

Despite our familiarity, or perhaps overfamiliarity, with this theme attending carefully to the images we use for God remains crucial.

A few of the youth and I watched the movie *Inception* last Wednesday night. *Inception* is a film about the power of an idea. It is based on the premise that a simple idea, embedded so deep in our subconscious we are not aware of its origin, so deep it is deeper than a dream within a dream; that this idea can change a life and change the world. I quote: “An idea is like a virus, resilient, highly contagious. The smallest seed of an idea can grow. It can grow to define or destroy you.”⁷

The images we have of God are just such ideas. Images of God are powerful in their simplicity and the depth with which they inhabit our spirits. Images of God have the power to do great good, to enable us to trust in a loving God and live out that love in our families, communities, and world. However, images of God also have the power to do great harm, to reinforce systems of domination, oppression and fear in our families, communities, and world. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to list images that fall clearly into one category or the other as it depends so heavily on context. An image that is life-giving for one person may be life-draining for another. But I wonder, if you look back on your life, if you can point to images for God that have done good or harm for you.

Images of God continue to challenge us

Despite our familiarity with the idea of a “God of many names” and our awareness of the diversity of images that have shaped us over the years, there are images of God that continue to stretch us as a church.

We hear in Isaiah: “The Lord goes forth like a soldier; like a warrior he stirs up his fury.”⁸ As a historic peace church, how can we understand the many places in scripture where God is described with violent imagery?

“I will cry out like a woman in labour,” God says in Isaiah, “I will gasp and pant.”⁹ Female images for God are increasingly common, yet I remain hesitant to name God with feminine personal pronouns in worship because I suspect it would

⁷ *Inception* (2010).

⁸ Isaiah 42:13

distract from reflection and prayer. As a church steeped in centuries of male language for God, how do we begin to understand and name a God who is truly beyond gender: both male and female and neither male nor female?

Metaphor

Images of God that challenge us remind us that every image both is and is not God. This is the nature of metaphor. Metaphor always conveys similarity and dissimilarity. Along with that statement that, "God is..." there is always a whisper, "and is not."¹⁰

God is Warrior. And is not Warrior.

God is Mother. And is not Mother.

God is Father. And is not Father.

God is Light. And is not Light.

God is the Bread of Life. And is not the Bread of Life.

God is Carpenter of New Creation. And is not Carpenter of New Creation.

God is Lord. And is not Lord.

God is Love. And is not Love.

God is... and is not.....

Image upon image, layer upon layer, encasing, enriching, unfolding, revealing, an infinitely complex, and utterly simple God, a God who is Mystery...and is not Mystery .

Music amplifies metaphor: A warning and a delight

Mixing metaphors for God with music amplifies their power, rooting them more deeply in our emotions and thoughts and spirits. To the extent possible, we need to be very careful about the images of God we allow to take root in ourselves, and our children, and our world. To the extent possible, we can strive to plant and nurture images we trust will be a force for healing and hope rather than brokenness and despair.

Despite that rather dire warning and the seriousness of the task, imaging God is a delight! I delight in imaging God! I believe we can all delight in imaging God! We can throw ourselves into this refreshing, sacred, playful task with the same joyful abandon as the guy somersaulting off the dock into the lake on the bulletin cover. God has gifted us not only with stunning collection of images in scripture and song, but also the creativity to imagine God in new ways that connect with our lives and communities and culture today.

Brian Wren

Brian Wren does uses metaphor masterfully in "God of many names,"¹¹ and the 14 other hymns he authored that are included in our current Mennonite Hymnal. This makes him one of the most prolific contemporary hymn writers in the book. Wren uses images that are rooted deeply in scripture yet fresh enough to capture our imaginations in a new way:

"Holy Spirit, Storm of Love."¹²

"Joyful is the dark, holy, hidden God,
rolling cloud of night beyond all naming."¹³

"Christ is alive! No longer bound to distance years in Palestine,
he comes to claim the here and now and conquer every place and time."¹⁴

⁹ Isaiah 42:14

¹⁰ Sallie McFague. *Metaphorical Theology*. Philadelphia: Augsburg, 1982. 15.

¹¹ "God of many names." *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. 77.

¹² "Holy Spirit, Storm of Love." *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. 132.

¹³ "Joyful is the dark." *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. 233.

Imaging a God who is “moving” and “endlessly becoming”¹⁵ is a never ending process. What a joy, what a delight, to discover and rediscover images of God all around us and in the words and music we sing.

Invitation to conversation

Too often the speaker has the delight of imaging God for the church. This morning I wish to invite all of you to join me. *I invite you to take a couple minutes to reflect on a hymn or song that expresses an image of God that is meaningful for you.* It may be an image meaningful to you today, or an image that held meaning for you at a certain point in your life. It may be based on a song from this hymnal or another, from camp or Vacation Bible School or praise and worship music. It may be a song you have written or song on the radio. After taking a moment to choose a song and an image, I invite you to turn to someone nearby and in groups of two or three share your songs and images of God with one another. I encourage people of all ages and languages, visitors and long-time members to participate. However, if you prefer to reflect quietly and independently you are also most welcome to do so. *Who do we sing that God is?*

Reflection and discussion.

Thank you for your openness to reflection and sharing. Let’s take a few minutes to share a few examples of songs and images with one another at the microphones. If you wish, please stand and briefly mention the image and song and if we know it we may sing a verse or two.

Sharing and singing.

Thank you to everyone who spoke, who shared in small groups, and who took time to reflect on images of God in song. invite you to turn in *Sing the Story* to number 143 and in the blue *Hymnal* to number 101.

A God of many names and no name

As much as we attempt to contain God in names and images, as much as we try to tame God with words and symbols, God cannot be contained and God cannot be tamed. God is a God of many names....and no name. And yet we ask our God who we cannot name to name us, and we trust our God we cannot image to love us and call us to love. And so we praise the nameless One of many names:

“Sing, sing, hallelujah, hallelujah,”
God is...and is not...¹⁶

Please pray and then sing with me:

Holy One, untamed by the names I give you, in the silence name me, that I may know who I am, hear the truth you have put into me, trust the love you have for me, which you call me to live out with my sisters and brothers in your human family. Amen.¹⁷

“Alleluia.”¹⁸

¹⁴ “Christ is alive!” *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. 278.

¹⁵ “God of many names.” *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. 77.

¹⁶ “God of many names.” *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. 77.

¹⁷ “Holy One.” *Sing the Story*. 143.

¹⁸ “Alleluia.” *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. 101.