

Naming God

Proper 16A

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Who do you say that I am? That's the question that the disciples consider in today's Gospel reading, and it's the unstated question from perhaps a newborn baby that the poem considers.

On one level, that's a good existential question - not just who am I, but who do people think I am?

But let's put ourselves in the place of the disciples here - How do we contemplate God? How do we wrap our human minds around the unknowable? How to name something that exceeds our capacity for language? How to name the unnameable?

We'll always fail, of course, and yet we can't resist the urge to try. Poets, painters, composers, theologians, and just plain old you and I have tried. The disciples try, too, naming specific prophets, and then the general category of 'prophet', until Simon Peter wins the point, almost like a game show. And also like a game show, he earns a huge bonus heading into the next round, with the promise of the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

Notice, too, the gradual narrowing of Jesus's focus in this passage. He starts with the ever-important question "What do people say about me?" It's hard not to imagine a bit of mischief here, as well as some eyebrow-raising or eye-rolling on Jesus's part as the disciples answer his question. Really? You think I'm 'that guy Jeremiah'?

But then he draws us in with the personal: Who do you say I am? Who am I to you? What does your experience tell you about me? With Peter's answer - you are the Messiah - and with Jesus's blessing of Peter, it's almost as if Jesus is saying that the rock upon which the church is built is not only - possibly - Peter

the person, but the experience of answering the question, “Who do you say that I am?”.

So what’s our answer? Who do we say that God is? How do we talk about the divine?

God-talk can feel uncomfortable for many, and maybe it’s because we always feel like we’re coming up short. And for many, the words we’ve been taught to use for God come up short: for some of us, Father and Lord make assumptions or carry otherwise troubling baggage. Even ‘God’ may feel like it has become cheapened through other uses.

So if names don’t always work, what about picturing God? We seem to need a vessel to get us there, too: maybe the image of a long-departed grandmother who knew you deeply and always cheered you on. Maybe it’s a favorite saint. Maybe it’s a favorite icon that gives you the window into God. Maybe it’s nature, or a concept like ‘love’ or ‘beauty’. Maybe God is, for you, found in silence, emptiness, and questions

Today’s poem faces a similar challenge, though in this case it seems to be the struggle to come up with the name of a new baby, the ‘little sister’ of the world. This new presence, though, is, like our unnameable God, infused with the language of the divine: the poet considers himself and those around him as ‘disciples’ anxiously awaiting the arrival of something new. “come home; we are here and listening for your name”. The little one is both morning star and medieval saint, and for now at least, can’t be snared or tamed with a name.

So how do we bring the limits of our humanity to God? How do we bring the unknowable divine to our human level? Jesus, of course, unites paradoxically those two realms, fully divine and fully human.

And when we are baptized, we commit to seeking Christ in all persons. This is, essentially, flipping the script - rather than bringing God down to our human level of language and imagery, we are asked to raise up those around us to the level of the divine. So perhaps another way of naming God is to simply name those who reflect back to us the image of God incarnate. Important or iconic people,

yes - God in the form of wounded healers like Martin Luther King Jr and Mother Teresa, truth-tellers like Malala and Malcolm X, justice-seekers like John Lewis and Dorothy Day, victims of systemic injustice like George Floyd and Brionna Taylor. But also God incarnate in the form of those we interact with in our everyday lives. Our doctors, nurses, grocery cashiers, teachers, and delivery people who sacrifice self for the greater good; our spouses, partners, coworkers, and neighbors who choose not to judge us for our more annoying quirks and habits; and all who suffer in silence, whether they have a name or not.

By seeking out - by naming - those whose Christ-ness points to the divine, we end up answering the very question we started with: Who do you say that I am?

Questions:

- How do you name god? What words work best? What images?
- Has your perception of god changed in our new normal?
- When all else fails and you can't 'tame' God, let alone name God, what does God feel like?
- What aspects of Christ-ness do you see readily around you? What new challenges to recognizing Christ in all persons have arisen for you?