

## PAINTING THE FACE OF THE HOLY

A Sermon by John Parker Manwell  
The Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church  
October 12, 2008

### OPENING WORDS

*On this Association Sunday, as we celebrate the life of our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition, it is appropriate that we call ourselves into a spirit of worship with words which remind us of the saving work that is ours to offer, for each other and for those who come among us. It is doubly appropriate, since for Paint Branch this week marks our Founders Day, when this congregation began to conduct its own services, meeting in College Park. In this spirit, let us hear now these words of our colleague, the Rev. Theresa Novak, of Ogden, Utah:*

Come into this place  
There are healing waters here  
And hands with soothing balm  
To ease your troubled days.  
Bring your wounds and aching hearts  
Your scars too numb to feel.  
Your questions and complaints,  
All are welcome here.  
Rest awhile.  
Let the warmth of this community

Surround you,  
Hold you,  
Heal you.  
When you feel stronger,  
Just a bit,  
Notice those that need you too.

They are here.  
They are everywhere.

Weep with them  
Smile with them,  
Work with them,  
Laugh along the way.

Pass the cup,  
Drink the holy fire.

Take it with you  
Into the world.

We are saved  
And we save each other  
Again, again, and yet again.

## READINGS

### 1

*Our service this morning speaks of the many different ways that we, and those who have lived before us, have painted the face of God.*

*But first we hear from the outspoken Christopher Hitchens, a prolific and outspoken writer who rejects all God ideas as totalitarian, and all religious belief as “sinister and infantile.” A self-described “anti-theist,” Hitchens last year published an anthology called The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever. In the introduction he wrote:*

The atheist generally says . . . that the existence of a deity cannot be *dis*-proved. It can only be found to be entirely lacking in evidence. . . . The religious person *must* go further and say that [the] creative force is also an intervening one: one that cares for our human affairs and is interested in what we eat . . . as well as in the outcomes of battles and wars. To assert this is quite simply to assert more than any human can possibly claim to know, and thus it falls, and should be discarded, and should have been discarded long ago.

### 2

*Next we hear from Marcus Borg, the well-known biblical scholar and member of the Jesus Seminar. I call this image, “God the Finger Shaker.” Borg recalls:*

Pastor Thorson shaped my childhood image of God in yet another way. He was a finger-shaker. I am not speaking metaphorically but literally: he actually shook his finger at us as he preached. Sometimes he even shook his finger while pronouncing the forgiveness of sins:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, hath had mercy upon us, and hath given His only Son to die for us, and for His sake forgiveth us all our sins.

Those words, accompanied by a chastising finger, carried a message: though told we were forgiven, we knew it was a close call.

### 3

*Don Cupitt is an Anglican priest and theologian in England, whose writings about God have gotten him into hot water with his church. Let's call it the image of God as "the pearl of great price." Cupitt writes:*

God is the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden at the centre of the religious life. The religious claim and demand upon us is God's will, the drama of the religious life within us is God's activity, and the goal of the religious life before us is God's nature. But we should not suppose God to be a substance, an independently-existing being who can be spoken of in a descriptive and non-religious way. . . .

I continue to speak of God and to pray to God. God is the mythical embodiment of all that one is concerned with in the spiritual life. . . . [God] is needed – but as a myth. . . . Myth is the best, clearest and most effective way of communicating religious truth.

### 4

*Last is this familiar passage from the writings of Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher and theologian. We'll call it the image of God as laden with the burdens and caricatures of many generations, yet an image worthy of great care:*

[God] is the most heavy-laden of all human words. . . . Generations of [humans] have laid the burden of their anxious lives upon this word and weighed it to the ground; it lies in the dust and bears their whole burden. . . . Where might I find a word like it to describe the highest! If I took the purest, most sparkling concept from the inner treasure-chamber of the philosophers, I could . . . not capture the presence of [the God] whom the generations . . . have honoured and degraded with their awesome living and dying. . . .

Certainly, they draw caricatures and write “God” underneath; they murder one another and say “in God’s name” . . . . But we may not give it up . . . . We cannot cleanse the word “God” and we cannot make it whole; but, defiled and mutilated as it is, we can raise it from the ground and set it over an hour of great care.

## **SERMON**

It has been said that every minister’s sermons are variations on just one theme that’s at the core of that minister’s life. This one is mine. My journey in ministry has been shaped by a profound longing to come to an understanding of God, of the Holy, which would accommodate both the Unitarianism in which I grew up and the liberal Christianity which nurtured my call to ministry – and which would also meet my longing for a personal relationship with life.

I offer this sermon, at this time, for several reasons. The simplest is to let you know more about me as your interim co-minister. But I also know that God-talk among us can be a hot-button issue. For that very reason, it seems important to me to talk about it, to let go of our distrust, share our stories and our life experience. We may still not use the same language, but as we come to understand that others among us are not doing so in the ways that so offend us, we may come not only to tolerate their presence but to *appreciate* each other’s understandings. That is my hope.

I offer my own experience as an illustration. I do not seek to tell you what you should paint, but to give you permission to paint for yourself, that

we may free ourselves from the ancient understandings that we have rejected but still hold us captive. We've already started our painting, in our together time this morning. I invite you in the "Reverberations" conversation during the Enrichment hour to say more. I invite us to find ways to keep this conversation going during the months ahead. We may never agree on the words we use, but I am confident that our underlying experiences of this "more than" dimension of our lives have a good deal in common – and that our conversation will bring us closer together. If this is true for me, it will also be true for your future ministers. And so let me start the conversation.

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Like most of you, I moved long ago beyond traditional understandings of the Holy. I suppose this makes me a humanist. But I was not ready to stop with this conclusion. It seemed to me more of a starting point than a stopping point on my journey. I wanted more than a negative or even neutral understanding of the universe. I wanted an active *relationship* with it, with life itself, a relationship in which both my head and my heart could find a home. And in describing this relationship, I wanted to feel *linked* with those who have struggled with these issues in centuries past, and who do so around the world today, and with all who have called themselves Unitarians, and Universalists, even though our understandings may differ. Perhaps you have shared this struggle.

I know that for me, at least, it will be a lifelong struggle, in which my understanding is always being stretched. Mark Twain, it is said, once recalled that at 14, he marveled at how little his father understood. At 30, he marveled at how much his father had learned. Of course, he was really speaking of how his own thinking had grown.

Throughout human history, as well as in scripture, we humans have painted the face of the Holy in many ways. What has changed in our time, however, is that with the evolution of science, it is now much harder to conceive of God as a personality, separate from humanity, managing human history from on high. For increasing numbers in our modern world, this idea of God is dead.

Anglican Bishop John A.T. Robinson proclaimed this almost fifty years ago, in his provocative book *Honest to God*.<sup>1</sup> But he was hardly the first. Nietzsche, a century earlier, told a parable about a man who ran into the marketplace one morning, shouting, "I seek God! I seek God!" Passersby taunted him. Perhaps he sleeps, or has run away, they sneered. Maybe he has fled the country. "I mean to tell you," the man persisted. "We have killed him, you and I! We are all his murderers!"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> London: SCM Press, 1963.

<sup>2</sup>(as told by Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, New York: Knopf, 1994, 356).

Yes, we of this modern age are the ones who have killed God. And it is we who, very often, still grieve our loss. Tennyson, a century and a half ago, found that his own crumbling faith left him --

An infant crying in the night;  
An infant crying for the light  
And with no language but a cry.<sup>3</sup>

Tennyson's lament might be our own, as we have lost our innocent childhood faith. No longer, as we have grown in our understanding of science, can we find a place in our cosmos for the anthropomorphic God we have painted in the past, enthroned on the upper deck of a three-story universe. No longer, as we have become more ecologically aware, can we find a place for a God who commands us to subdue the world of nature. No longer, after the Holocaust, can we find a place for an all-powerful protector and shepherd. In that sense, we are *all* humanists now, unless we have compartmentalized our religion and our science.

Our loss can leave us with an emptiness we long to fill, in our longing for a personal relationship with the universe, with life. This longing lives on in the hearts of many, even in my heart, and perhaps yours, the hearts of thoughtful people who have recognized the truth that the church has feared to tell us: that God did not create us, but rather, we humans created God, out of our deepest longings. The forces of the universe are of course objective and real, but our portrait of them is a human projection or myth,

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Karen Armstrong, *Ibid.*, p. 358.

reflecting our own experience of that universe, and often, our hopes and also our fears. *Thus, "God" is a human painting* of our experience of what Tillich called "ultimate reality." Though traditional theology insists that God is unchanging, our painting has changed constantly over human history, and still is changing, as we long for connection with something larger than ourselves, call it God or simply an experience of life lived in depth, beyond our everyday concerns and attachments. Something that draws us out of ourselves, that calls us to grow, to love our neighbor, and to seek justice.

Sometimes, to be sure, we have turned away from this task. It can be painful. We may be angry at feeling duped by the God of our childhood - now revealed as impotent in the face of life's suffering and tragedy. Or we just can't accept traditional patriarchal imagery. Or we reject the words that we humans have often put in God's mouth, or the violence we humans have done in God's name. And besides all this, we may be embarrassed to recognize any realm in our lives beyond the world of science and intellect. We may be embarrassed even to *speak* of God, at least among our fellow Unitarian Universalists.

If somewhere within ourselves we harbor a longing for "more than" our daily round of life, then when we talk about the death of God, we may be talking about the death of part of ourselves. For many what has died is a part of ourselves that longs for something beyond ourselves to which we can *give* ourselves, something beyond the human quest for things, for power. Harvard theologian Gordon Kaufman<sup>4</sup> reminds us that to "believe" in

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4 *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.)

God is not about abstract ideas. It's about how we live. "To what should we . . . give ourselves?" he asks. It's *that to which we give ourselves* that is God for us.

This morning, then, I want to invite us to move beyond traditional connotations of the word "God," which we have rejected, to let our imaginations go for a time and, in our mind's eye, paint the face of God for ourselves. Call it "God," or "good," call it "the Eternal," the "Holy" or "the Creative Force" or the "more than." If Science, and Reason, open new dimensions of life for you, let that be your title. Call it whatever you like: I'm not talking now about names. I'm talking about images. Visual and verbal images. Not images painted by somebody else, which we've rejected; but images that portray *our own experience* of life's ultimate reality, our own deepest longing. Images which ground the call to love and social justice, which we have sensed so strongly in this congregation.

In his book, *The God We Never Knew*, from which we read this morning, Marcus Borg calls the finger-shaking God of his childhood a "monarchical" image. Images such as "king," "Lord" and "father," he warns, can lead us to make God into a distant male authority figure. The women of our movement pointed this out some decades ago, leading us to shift the imagery of our worship. Exclusively male images, and especially royal ones, can lead to what he calls a "performance model" of the religious life, in which to "sin" is to transgress an array of "oughts" and "shoulds," which we can never fully satisfy.

In contrast, for Borg, are “relational” images – images like God as strong, supportive mother, or intimate, loving father, or as lover or companion on life’s journey. These images emphasize our experience of God’s love rather than our fear of judgment. With these images, sin becomes not breaking endless moral rules, but giving our loyalty to something too small, something less than God. When God is relational, our focus shifts from getting into heaven, to walking faithfully with God in the here and now. Prayer becomes not petitioning God to intervene on our side, but listening for that inner voice that will change and guide us, so that we may find ourselves on God’s side.

Borg’s relational understanding of God is one with which our Universalist ancestors would be right at home. Theirs was a God of love, who loved us too much to punish us forever in some flaming Hell.

For myself, I keep repainting the face of the Holy as I reflect on my own experience and longing. Sometimes I speak of embracing God as a loving being beyond myself, "as if" such a being existed, despite the skepticism of my brain. After all, to embrace a loving God as if it was real, and reflect this love in our lives, *makes* it real; it becomes a self-fulfilling faith.

At other times, I speak of the Holy as a quality of depth and intimacy in our relations with self and others and the cosmos – a quality that encourages me to see others as children of God, like me. Walking with God then means walking in love with my fellow humans and with all of

creation. It also introduces an ethical imperative into my portrait of God. God, in this understanding, is not an abstract idea but an *experience*.

But for me, even this is not enough. I need a face of the Holy with whom I can have a daily personal relationship, an active prayer life. I want to feel a living presence within my heart to which I can pour out my constant “thank you” to the universe for the blessings that life has showered on me with an abundance that is so breathtaking; a presence which will be for me a source of guidance and strength. God has always been seen as the life force of the universe. I want to feel a personal relationship with this life force, with life itself. When I pray, I am praying to *Life, to the Spirit of Life* to which all of us pray, every Sunday, to come unto us, to sing in our hearts all the stirrings of compassion, to move in our hands, giving our lives the shape of justice.

I will be honest with you: My head and my heart do not always pull together. When that is so, I am inclined to follow my heart, with its intuitive, experiential knowledge. I let my head struggle along behind to supply the words and concepts as best it can. I want a sense of the Holy which floods my heart at the bedside of a dying person, warms it as I watch children at play, moves it as I let go of my busy-ness in the silence of meditation. If I can ground this awareness in an intellectual understanding, wonderful. But if not, I will accept the call of my heart as part of life's mystery and keep on with my painting.

Just as the way I paint a mountain scene today will differ from the way I might have painted it when I was young, though the scene is the same, so the way I paint the face of the Holy will change, and keep on changing. As St. Paul said, “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I thought like a child. . . . when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” (1 Cor. 13:11) My portfolio of paintings over the years will be the record of my spiritual journey.

As I have continued to imagine, and to paint, I have come to love Brian Wren hymn, “Bring Many Names.” Wren is a prolific hymn writer. Eight of his texts appear in our hymnal. This one grew from a hymn writing workshop at which Wren assigned everyone to write a brief text reflecting an imaginative image of the Holy. He liked the resulting images so much that he recast them all into a single hymn, I love its inviting images. I think that some of us might be just as imaginative. I hope someday we will write our own hymn.

And so I say to you, paint, and keep on painting. As you paint, listen to your heart, as to your head. Paint both your experience and your longing. Name your painting as you choose. But paint. There is no “right” portrait. There is no right name. But though our paintings will differ, our quest is the same, to reveal the highest longings of the human experience. That’s a journey worth sharing, and we’re all in it together.

Now let’s sing Brian Wren’s hymn, #23. It has six verses, each with a most unorthodox image of God. I’d like to invite all of us to sing the first

verse, welcoming many images. I'll ask the men to sing verse two, with its image of a "strong mother" God, and the women to sing verse three, with its image of a "warm father God." I invite those on the left to sing verse four, and those on the right to sing verse five. We'll all come together again in the last verse, with its recognition that even with all our images, the Holy will always remain beyond full human understanding.

BENEDICTION: May we never lay down our brushes and our paints, even as our minds search for greater understanding. And may we have the courage to let ourselves be guided by the image we paint.