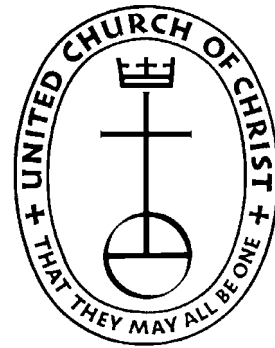


A House for Hope, Part 2: Foundations

A Sermon By —
LIBBY TIGNER
August 29, 2010



Progressive theology can help us re-build an understanding of God that is helpful and hopeful. Progressive theology acknowledges that no one way of understanding God encompasses all of the truth about God; it acknowledges that human experience is the starting place for theological exploration, and it acknowledges that struggle is part of the theological process.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
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A House for Hope, Part 2. Foundations

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Last week I started a sermon series that will continue today, and then on September 26 and October 3, the days that Jerry will be away on a study leave. I am using as my starting place for these sermons a book by Unitarian Universalist ministers, Rebecca Ann Parker and John Buehrens, called *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century*.

Their primary claim in the book is that in the midst of the many challenges through which we are living – war and torture, the failures of world-wide economic systems, unprecedented (in our lifetimes) polarity and division between people of differing ideologies, and the real and present danger that our lifestyles have created for the planet on which we live – in the midst of these challenges, progressive theology can offer a word of hope and a pathway toward authentic living. They employ, throughout the book, the metaphor of a theological house to “articulate the frames that give our dreams shape and meaning.” They explore some of the classic topics of theology through a progressive vantage point, reminding us that theology has a long history, and that human thinking about God and the nature of things continues to evolve and change.

Last week we talked about meaning of the church, the gathered community, through the metaphor of walls. This week we will look at our foundation, that is, our understanding of God. Who or what do we think God is? How might God’s presence be understood in our midst? How does our understanding of God impact how we live our lives? I am aware that both Jerry and I have preached sermons in the past that have dealt with this exact same question. But here’s the thing: responding to this question is, for me, like aiming at a moving target. I have found that my thinking about God – about who or what God is and how this God may or may not be able to act – keeps changing. It’s changed by leaps and bounds from what I was taught as a child. And it continues to shift and to take on nuance and depth the more I ask it.

I want to lead us into this question by the way of three biblical myths, all from the ancient Hebrew scripture. The first is from Genesis, in the very beginning of the Hebrew story. The second is at the end of the Exodus story, and the third is from the book of the Kings, in the time of the divided kingdom.

In Genesis we read about Jacob, who was the son of Isaac and Rebekah and the grandson of Abraham and Sarah. The story takes place late in his life, on the eve of his

return to his homeland, hoping to reconcile with his brother, Esau, whom Jacob had cheated out of his birthright and blessing. That night, an angel wrestled with Jacob all night long. Jacob survived the night, but walked with a limp from then on. He also got a new name, Israel, which means “one who struggled with God and lived.”

The second story is from the book of Exodus, and is set at the end of Moses’ life. Moses had led God’s people out of Egypt, had shepherded them through their years of wandering in the wilderness, and had been their mediator with God, delivering the commandments and the laws that God set forth for the people. Moses complained to God that after all of these years, he had never seen God, and so God told Moses to stand in the rock of the mountain. The story says that God said to Moses, “While you are hidden in the cleft of the rock, I will pass you by, but I will cover you with my hand, for you cannot see my face and live.” And so God passed by Moses, and after God had passed by, Moses was able to see only God’s back.

The final story is from I Kings, and finds God’s prophet, Elijah, running for his life after a confrontation with King Ahab. Elijah climbed up into a mountain cave to hide, and God called to him there. Elijah was told to go stand on the mountain, that God was about to pass by. A great wind blew through the mountain, splitting the rocks apart, and then there was an earthquake; and then a great fire swept through. But God was not in the wind, nor the earthquake, nor the fire. Then came the sound of sheer silence, and Elijah knew that God was there.

Rebecca Parker writes in the book, “The divine human encounter is the rock on which our theological house stands. At the heart of liberal theology is a mysterious glimpse, a transforming struggle, with the oblique presence of God. ‘Theology’ literally means ‘God-talk’ and derives from *theos* (God) and *logos* (word). But talk of God is tricky business. The Bible warns ‘Make no graven images of God.’ God may be sighted by a sideways glance, sensed in a dream, felt in a struggle, or unveiled in a luminous epiphany. But the moment human beings think they know who God is and carve out their conclusions in stone, images of God can become dangerous idols. In Jewish tradition, God is ultimately un-nameable, and some never pronounce the letters that spell out God’s unspeakable name.”

In progressive theology, we recognize that central to our struggle to name and to know God is an understanding that all human naming and knowing of God provisional, changing, illusive. We also recognize that any way that we have of speaking about God can become an idol. We humans can and do use our limited understanding of God to hammer into others our own way of thinking. We have used our understanding of God to advance our own causes around the world and

throughout history; we have endorsed slavery, waged wars, imprisoned minds and bodies based on our particular ideas of God.

For much of Christian history, and certainly in most of American Christian history, the predominant, traditional image of God has been that of a theist, supernatural being. Let me break down that phrase. Theistic from *theos*, or god, meaning that God's nature is not like human nature. That God exists on a different plane of being, outside of human existence. Supernatural indicates that God operates outside of the laws of nature. God has the power to supersede things like physics and time. And God as a being indicates that God has a personality, and a will, and desires and thoughts.

Along with theist, supernatural being, other characteristics have been assigned to the traditional, western, Christian way of understanding God: words like omniscient, or all knowing, and omnipotent, or all powerful, and omnipresent, or in all places at all times. Other words used to describe are righteous, unchanging, sovereign, eternal, unmoved-mover, and king.

But for the last 100-plus years, theologians around the globe have been deconstructing some of this imagery of God. Our modern and post-modern life experiences have led some of us to conclude that these images of God no longer make sense. The atrocities of World War II, especially the death of millions in the Holocaust and the utter destruction wrought by nuclear weapons, made, for many, the idea of an all-powerful impossible to any longer accept. Process theologies, along with the theologies from the under-side, like liberation, feminist and womanist thinking, systematically and convincingly chipped away at older, more conventional ways of imaging God.

The mid-twentieth-century announcement by theologians that "God is dead" did not proclaim that there is no God. It did, however, proclaim that the way that western Christianity has imagined God did not particularly help all of us anymore, and that if the idea of God was to be relevant, new ways of understanding God would need to be articulated.

And this is precisely where a progressive theology can help us construct an understanding of God that is life-affirming, not based in fear, and consistent with our real-life, day-to-day experience. Let me briefly offer three ways that progressive theology can help us re-build an understanding of God that is helpful and hopeful.

First, progressive theology acknowledges that no one way of understanding God encompasses all of the truth about God. The Center for Progressive Christianity, a think-tank and resource development center, has published eight points by which they define progressive Christianity. One of their points is: *By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us.*

In other words, none of us has a monopoly on the truth when it comes to God. I think our stories today from Genesis and Kings support that idea: Moses was not allowed to see all of God; Elijah experienced God not in power and majesty, but in silence. The warning against graven images is a warning against holding onto images and meanings about God that are carved in stone in our hearts, and which fail to acknowledge that there is truth beyond what we can understand and appreciate.

Fooling ourselves into thinking that our way is the only way and our truths are the only truths leads us only down the paths of domination and destruction. If you have any trouble imagining that, just listen to some of the so-called Christian rhetoric that is being spewed out in opposition to the building of an Islamic center near Ground Zero in New York.

Second, progressive theology acknowledges that human experience is the starting place for theological exploration. A traditional theology that tells us that God is father and righteous is not a life-affirming theology for a girl who is sexually molested by her dad. A theology that has sanctioned racism is not liberating to people of color. A theology that claims that God is all powerful and all loving and yet that God allows teenagers to die because they are young and stupid enough to drag-race down Ocean Blvd. cannot be a comforting theology to a grieving mother.

Progressive theology starts where we are. Progressive theology allows us to ask the questions that have meaning to us. It doesn't assume that white, male, Europeans who lived in the 19th century have the only or even the best way of understanding the divine nature. Each of us, male and female, of differing social standing, educational levels, abilities, sexual orientation – no matter who we are, get to – no – *have the responsibility of* – doing our own theological work.

And third, progressive theology acknowledges that struggle is part of the theological process. To really do our theological work, we have to grapple with the hard questions of pain and suffering. We have to make sense of how God is present in the midst of our challenges. Our biblical story of Jacob affirms the struggle – Jacob who

fought through the night with God's messenger, and bore the scars of that encounter for the rest of his life.

In my own search for language about God, over the last decade or so, I have resonated deeply with language that John Shelby Spong, who has called God the Source of Life, the Source of Love and the Source of Being. Jerry and I have taken another phrase of Spong's and we use it in both our baptismal and our communion rituals, naming God as the Mystery of Life, the Mystery of Love, and the Mystery of Being. But lately I've been feeling that the mystery language is not enough. I agree that God is mysterious and that we cannot completely understand the sacred center of life, but right now, I'm not finding that word very helpful. I can get lost in mystery, and right now I need God to be more of a beacon than a mystery. One reason for that, I believe, is that as I grow older I am quite naturally more increasingly familiar with the struggles of life. Rebecca Parker poses the ultimate question about God in this way:

"The question 'does God exist' arises not as a cool inquiry into the nature of ultimate reality. It arises in the messy, painful dead ends, on the cold winter afternoons where life is exposed to the raw elements. It arises among the communities of those lacking bare necessities. It arises among the lonely, the hungry, the frightened, and those without voice. In such settings, the question is not about metaphors or about rational arguments. It is more elemental. It is a question borne in the suffering souls of human beings, and its meaning is a cry for hope: Is there any help for pain? Is there any hope for the disempowered and silenced? The abandoned? And when everything human fails, and nothing that is within the power of human beings to do can be done, what then? Does God exist? Is there a source of healing and transformation that will bring about justice in heaven or earth?"

Parker goes on to say, "The answer to this question cannot be coerced. Religious tradition can show a path and give some clues, but when a person or a community is up against a wall, facing a dead end, tradition at best serves as a nudge to take the next step. The choice to take the next step is an act of holy curiosity. It could also be called an act of faith. To those who act on faith, to those who move in the midst of mystery and silence, even when trembling and afraid, the face of God sometimes appears."

Lately, I've been thinking that God is the courage to keep going, to take the next step. God is the hope that this present challenge, even this present joy, is not all there is. That hope is grounded in a lifetime of storms and beautiful clear days. It's grounded in a lifetime of watching seasons change and knowing that if I plant tomato seeds, a tomato plant will grow up from the ground. It's grounded in a lifetime of knowing that babies are born and eventually will die, and when they do, the love that they had for us

and we for them remains with us. And it is grounded in the knowledge that in our lives, there will be moments of pain and also moments of profound grace. I don't think we're promised much more than that. But I think that may be enough.

The courage to take that next step is, I think, at least in part, where God is to be found. Today I can find no better words for expressing my understanding of God than those of 20th-century theologian Paul Tillich. He said, "*There are no valid arguments for the existence of God, but there are acts of courage in which we affirm the power of being, whether we know it or not.*"

May we each have the courage to act, to live, in the fullness of God's love. Amen.