

“The ‘G’ Word”
(Second in the ‘Big, ScaryWords’ Sermon Series)
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I want to briefly catch up those of you who were not here two weeks ago on Oct 5. At that time, I introduced the idea of offering a sermon series that would explore those religious words and concepts that so many of us abandoned some time ago in our religious journeys.

At some point in our individual lives, many of us came to feel that particular words that had been part of our early religious training, were either rationally nonsensical or emotional damaging, or both. For some of us those words, and all the associations connected with them, have been rejected so vehemently that they have been excised from our religious vocabularies. And because Unitarian Universalist churches tend to be filled with defectors from other traditions, our collective religious vocabulary, our collective religious expression, has also been gradually purged of such “offending” words.

Perhaps most folks would be satisfied to leave it that way. Many of us would be happy if we were never reminded of what we had left behind. But my own sense is that those words, and all their associations, are not dead and gone without a trace, but still living, in the shadows of our psyches and our collective psyche as a congregation. They are living, perhaps as wounds, or scars, or as fears, or as stumbling blocks, as sources of anxiety and anger and reactivity; they are alive but in darkness; they are alive but frozen, and their continued presence is a tacit subtext for our current religious life. As long as they are silently and forbiddingly there, we are not fully free.

And so, I want to try to ‘take on’ some of those words, to help us unpack them, investigate them, reinterpret them, perhaps redeem them, so that the words, and we ourselves, may be opened up for new meanings.

At the end of that service two weeks ago, I asked the folks present to actually write down for me what their “Big Scary Words” were, and I have to say there was quite an outpouring! The list was long, and indeed, *very scary*—especially for me, as someone who’s trying to preach here! Think of this as a list of words that have a difficult emotional charge around them:

Absolution, Afterlife, Anxiety, Bless, Blessed, Catholicism, Catholic, Christ Our Savior, Lord, Jesus Christ, Church, Covenant, Communion, Confession, Crucifixion, Damnation, Death, Devotion, Depression, Despair, Divine, Eternity, Evangelical, “Everlasting Damnation”, Evil, Faith, “Fear vs. Faith”, “Forever and ever, world without end”, Fundamentalist, Grateful, Grace, Guilt, Justified Guilt, God, God’s Will, God the Father, Shepherd, Almighty, Lord, Divine, Angry God, God-fearing, Heaven, Hell, Holy, Holy Ghost, Immortality, “Impure thoughts”, Justice, The Lord’s Prayer, Love, Miracles, Praise, Pray, “Pride vs. Humility”, Redeemer, Redemption, Reincarnation, Repent, Respect (for parents faith), Right (vs. Left?), Sacred, Saints, Salvation, Satan, Savior

Sex, Sin, “Sins of Omission and Commission”, “Sin—Regular and Original”, “Deadly Sins”, “Self-abuse”, “Shame as a Virtue”, Soul, Spiritual, Spirituality, Truth, Theology, Worship, “All words that carry images of a power on high”, and last but not least: “Just about anything from the Baltimore Catechism”

As I compiled this list several things occurred to me:

It occurred to me that every word that every person put down has a personal story connected to it. The list is heavy with memory, with confusion, and with damage. It provides a strange and intimate glimpse into the secret heart of this community.

And I thought, Oh my goodness, if I really start talking about some of these things, folks are going to start bringing eggs and rotten tomatoes to throw at me!

And yet this list of words also struck me as practically trembling with questions and curiosity and challenge. I feel both sadness and exhilaration in being offered these tender admissions. I feel sad that these words have so often been used as tools of control, even as weapons, and I feel exhilarated with the hope that they need not remain as such, and that there is some possibility of transformation here.

Many of the words cited on the list actually came up many times from many different people. But there were two hands-down winners in terms of the number of times they were mentioned. The all-time favorite big scary word was “Sin.” There is no question that there is an extreme emotional charge around that word. And the runner up was the “G” word: God.

And so, with the obvious caveat that it is impossible to adequately explore the subject of God in ten sermons, let alone one, I want at least to begin the journey at the place where it began for most of us.

I want to explore one central thought in next few minutes. I’d like to invite us to consider this:

That any understanding, any thought of God, any idea of God, is a human creation--a creation of the mind, a projection of the imagination, or a product of language. This does not mean that there is no Divine reality to which those ideas refer. This does not mean that an individual’s sense of relationship to a Divinity is necessarily a fiction.

But according to the teachings of mystics and theologians and enlightened beings through the ages of humanity, according the vast literature of spiritual testimony, any direct encounter with the Reality shatters all preconceptions and renders words obsolete.

Therefore, any image we have, any idea we have, is a construction and it can be deconstructed and reconstructed. There are life-giving God images, and there are God images that damage and inhibit joy and fulfillment. We are each free to construct an idea of God that is life-giving and liberating.

You may ask, why should I bother? I am happy and satisfied, you might say—like the poet James Kavanaugh who has found a vivid, liberated life without God in it—I am

happy and satisfied to be without that “monkey on my back”. Of course, you are free to be self-determined and God-free.

But I also want to raise the possibility that there may be something essential and worthy in the idea of God, some opening to beauty and wonder and hope in the ideal of God. For many human beings, including a few of us here at Theodore Parker Church, being God-free is not a desirable end point. For some folks here, God language is still felt as an invitation to deeper meaning and experience.

There were some notions expressed in James Kavanaugh’s poem, “My Easy God Is Gone” that I want to go back to. I think they point to what is often at the heart of people’s ambivalence towards, or outright rejection of, the idea of God. The imagery Kavanaugh uses to describe his childhood god is personal to his imagination in some ways, but it is also probably familiar to many of us—

His God is male, bearded, older than anything or anyone yet tireless and vigorous, stern, demanding, comforting in a controlling sort of way, remote and emotionally unknowable, yet everywhere, always watching, always listening, judging, forgiving—as long as we are properly remorseful—the final arbiter of our worthiness. God is the ultimate parent, the Uberparent.

It is rare that a child’s god-image will be connected with “Mother”, with the breast, with the lap, with the cradling arms. More often a child’s God-image is first and fundamentally an image of authority. In fact, it can be helpful and very revealing to look for correlations between how we experienced our parents, (perhaps especially our fathers) and how we imagined, or how we *felt*, God. There is probably going to be a connection there—a connection that may have a positive or negative impact on how we still image God.

And it is no wonder that for so many of us who rejected God, we did so in adolescence, when it is necessary to wrestle with and depose the authority figures in our lives in order to discover ourselves as independent individuals. We would either want to reject an ultimate, Divine authority-figure, or we would want to change or reinvent our sense of divinity. Some of us are still trying to do that, and for some of us the falling-out was complete and final.

Whether we’ve been able to reinvent or rediscover God for ourselves, or whether we have finally rejected God, there is probably still an old vestigial God-image lurking in the backs of our brains taking up psychic space. We can begin to identify our residual God-image by answering this inquiry:

“Tell me about the God you don’t believe in.”

What are the characteristics of the God you don’t believe in?

Kavanaugh has a very telling line: “He, the mysterious, took all mystery away, corroded my imagination, controlled the stars and would not let them speak for themselves.” I was intrigued by the comment from one member of the congregation that “just about anything

from the Baltimore Catechism” could fall into the big-scary-words category. Having never seen the Baltimore Catechism, I looked it up.

For those who are as unfamiliar with this as I was, the Baltimore Catechism was the first translation of Catholic religious teaching from the 16th century Latin into English. The Baltimore Catechism was published in 1891, and was used as the standard catechism for nearly the next 100 years. Although it began to fall out of favor after the reforms of Vatican II (which began in 1963), it was not until 1994 that it was completely replaced by the contemporary Catholic Catechism—a much friendlier teaching tool.

As I looked through the Baltimore Catechism, I was immediately struck by the insistent tone of indoctrination, of impressing upon the mind of the child an explanation for everything. Every answer to every religious question was defined in succinct terms that could, and were expected to be, committed to memory.

There is a different but similar method of religious instruction in conservative protestant churches. They don’t use a catechism booklet, but engage children in a rigorous memorization of bible passages for the purpose of “proof-texting”. A good evangelical Christian will know the bible inside and out, and will be able to answer a question by turning to a passage, reading the scriptural text and then interpreting that text in answer.

But a child’s mind in its natural state is as wild and open as a prairie, full of possibility and wonderment. There is something tragic about any process of indoctrination that stunts the imagination or imbeds the mind with such concrete answers to such cosmic questions.

Karen Armstrong is a renowned scholar and author in the study of religions. After spending many years in a religious order seeking God through study and prayer, she sadly found that her God remained remote and cold. She could not stop her personal faith from finally, quietly, slipping away. Yet her fascination with religious ideas remained intact. While working on her book “A History of God” she met with many religious adepts and leaders who began to show her a new understanding of how one might search for God. She writes:

“Instead of waiting for God to descend from on high, I should deliberately create a sense of God for myself. Other rabbis, priests, and Sufis would have taken me to task for assuming that God was—in any sense—a reality ‘out there’; they would have warned me not to expect to experience God as an objective fact that could be discovered by the ordinary process of rational thought. They would have told me that in an important sense God is a product of the creative imagination, like the poetry and music that I found so inspiring.”

“I should deliberately create a sense of God for myself...”

There was a time in my own spiritual process as a young adult where I deliberately reinvented my God as a kind of Celestial, Slavic, Zha Zha Gabore—if you can imagine omniscience and unconditional love in such a guise! In my imagination, her starry throne was actually more like a big, red-velvet easy chair; she wore galaxies like diamonds. She had an intoxicating perfume about her that would encircle you along with her

indulgent love. Her face was invisible; it was a midnight-blue starry sky. Only her mouth—her great smiling, pouting, laughing mouth was visible, like the Cheshire Cat in *Alice and Wonderland*. "Oh my Darlink," she would say, "Vat are you vorrying you silly head about now? Come, sit vis me and tell me all about it. And together ve vill see that it is not vat it seems to be, and you vill remember that you, and all things, are God."

It worked for me at the time! It was a very healing image.

But here is the point: It is in the imagery of poetry or myth or dreams, in awe-inspiring music, in the majesty of nature, in the unfathomable night sky, in whatever captures and enlivens the imagination, in whatever experiences awaken the heart and make us come alive with feeling, it is in these things that one can begin to have an intuition of Divinity. Neither catechisms nor the processes of reason can give us that.

The most essential idea of God, the essential idea of the Holy that can be found across times and cultures, is that it opens the human heart and imagination to a sense of wonder and awe that lifts us out of daily experience and ordinary consciousness, offering a glimpse of majesty and wholeness. The word "God" points in some way to the idea of the total Reality, All-That-Is, unified and illumined and shot through with intelligence.

One of my favorite expressions of this is from the poet William Wordsworth, in his *Lines Written Above Tinturn Abbey*...

And I have felt a presence that disturbs me
with the joy of elevated thoughts;
A sense sublime of something
far more deeply interfused
whose dwelling is the light of setting suns
and the round ocean and living air
a motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought
and rolls through all things.

Whether God occurs to you as a personal being, some kind of "Thou", or as an impersonal and abstract force, like the Toa, or whether the God-Ideal speaks to you through nature or through science, your image of God is shaped by your imagination.

Name the old God you don't believe in, and say goodbye. Then allow that liberated space, that empty God-space to remain open—to mystery, to wonder, to the unknown, and to the play of your imagination.

May it be so,
Amen.