

# GOD IS NOT GOD'S NAME

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## OPENING WORDS

Each Sunday we start our services with a “call to worship.” Many years ago a member of the church I served at the time asked me why we use that word. “We don’t come here to worship God, do we? Why call it worship?” I reminded him that the word worship really means “to shape things of worth” and that our worship services seek to do just that. He was (mostly) satisfied. But I continue to wrestle with the other part of his question. Do we come here to worship God?

20<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian Universalist humanists would likely say, with vigor, “absolutely not!” But I wonder. I wonder because I have spent a lifetime coming to terms with my deep and abiding faith in God. And I honestly think one of the reasons we gather each week is to experience God’s presence.

But before any of you have a heart attack, let me assure you that for me, as for many progressive religious people, God is not the concrete, dogmatized man in the sky that our culture has taught us to believe (or in most of *our* cases, *not* believe) in. I know there is a much deeper way of understanding the powerful presence that I feel in my life every day. Calling it God is, perhaps, impractical in our liberal congregations. But today I remind us, as my friend of blessed memory Forrest Church taught me, “God is not God’s name.”

I encourage us to invite into our lives that transcendent yet deeply internal spirit we know but can’t always name to be with us; and to open our hearts and minds to a broader understanding of who and what that spirit is.

## HYMN #23 (*Singing the Living Tradition*): **Bring Many Names** (Words: Brian Wren, 1987)

Bring many names, beautiful and good,  
Celebrate, in parable and story,  
Holiness in glory, living, loving God.  
Hail and Hosanna! Bring many names!

Strong mother God, working night and day,  
Planning all the wonders of creation,  
Setting each equation, genius at play:  
Hail and Hosanna, strong mother God!

Warm father God, hugging every child,  
Feeling all the strains of human living,  
Caring and forgiving, till we’re reconciled:  
Hail and Hosanna, warm father God!

Old, aching God, grey with endless care,  
Calmly piercing evil’s new disguises,  
Glad of good surprises, wiser than despair:  
Hail and Hosanna, old, aching God!

Young, growing God, eager, on the move,  
Saying no to falsehood and unkindness,  
Crying out for justice, giving all you have:  
Hail and Hosanna, young, growing God!

Great, living God, never fully known,  
Joyful darkness far beyond our seeing,  
Closer yet than breathing, everlasting home:  
Hail and Hosanna, great, living God!

## *A Litany of God* — A READING for two voices

INTRO: For generations, God has been defined small ways, though a narrow understanding of creed and dogma. That has meant that many progressive religious people have rejected God out of hand. What we forget is that there are many, many other ways of understanding God. And our theologians have given us tools to do so.

But theology should never be left to theologians alone. Poets and artists and musicians often do a better job of getting to the heart of God. To help us explore more deeply the meaning of God to people of our religious persuasion, here is a theological and poetic taste of how we might approach this idea of God, with short definitions of God from 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century progressive theologians interspersed among poetic readings from a variety of traditions spanning many years.

These expressions point to the meaning and mystery of God. Listen for what resonates in you.

*God is not God's name. God is our name for that which is greater than all  
and yet present in each.*

(Forrest Church)

From Mechtild of Magdeburg, 13<sup>th</sup> c. mystic:

A fish cannot drown in water, a bird does not fall in air.  
In the fire of its making, gold does not vanish: the fire brightens.  
Each creature God made must live in its own true nature;  
How could I resist my nature, that lives for oneness with God?

*God, for process theology, is an event-in-progress like all others – not a metaphysical  
exception but part and parcel of the nature of reality.*

(Alfred North Whitehead)

“Briefly It Enters, and Briefly Speaks” by Jane Kenyon:

I am the blossom pressed in a book, found again after two hundred years. . . .  
I am the maker, the lover, and the keeper. . . .  
When the young girl who starves sits down to a table she will sit beside me. . . .  
I am food on the prisoner's plate. . . .  
I am water rushing to the wellhead, filling the pitcher until it spills. . . .  
I am the patient gardener of the dry and weedy garden. . . .  
I am the stone step, the latch, and the working hinge. . . .  
I am the heart contracted by joy. . . the longest hair, white before the rest. . . .  
I am there in the basket of fruit presented to the widow. . . .  
I am the musk rose opening unattended, the fern on the boggy summit. . . .  
I am the one whose love overcomes you, already with you when you think to call my name. . . .

*God is everlastingly emergent, alive, responsive, creative, at one with the chaotic,  
messy universe we live in.* (Rebecca Parker)

A poem by Marina Tsvetaeva, 20<sup>th</sup> c. Russian:

The gold that was my hair has turned Silently to gray. Don't pity me! Everything's been realized, In my breast all's blended and attuned.	Attuned, as all of distance blends In the smokestack moaning on the outskirts And Lord! A soul's been realized: The most deeply secret of your ends.
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*God is in all things yet not exhausted by them.* (John Buehrens)

“Apotheosis of the Kitchen Goddess II” by Teresa Noelle Roberts:

There is a goddess and I know her. Her hands are not clean,  
And she is large and strong and not too young.  
She wears a sweatshirt with a hood and jeans, and sells black-purple eggplant, spinach, bright  
broccoli, sixty cents the pound at the Greenmarket at Union Square.  
Her slat-side truck has Pennsylvania plates, and she says she lives near Lancaster.  
But I know the truth, because her calloused hands turn earth  
To things good to eat, and green, and lovely.

*God is that sustaining, transforming, community-building power not made with human hands.*  
(James Luther Adams)

From the Ojibway Native Americans:

Grandfather, look at our brokenness.  
We know that in all creation only the human family has strayed from the Sacred Way.  
We know that we are the ones who are divided,  
And we are the ones who must come back together to walk in the Sacred Way.  
Grandfather, Sacred One, Teach us love, compassion, and honor  
That we may heal the earth and each other.

**HYMN #1047** (*Singing the Journey*) — ***Nada Te Turbe*** (from the Taize community,  
committed to an open hearted, ecumenical Christianity, based in France though their music  
encompasses many traditions and languages):

*Nada Te Turbe nada te espante, quien a Dios tiene, nada le falta.  
Nada Te Turbe, nada te espante, solo Dios basta.*

Nothing can trouble, nothing can frighten, those who seek God shall never go wanting.  
Nothing can trouble, nothing can frighten, God alone fills us.

Paul Tillich, probably the greatest theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, once suggested that we stop using the word God for 100 years. He had a point. For the word has been a problem for a long time.

Some of you may remember a sermon I did a while back called “Wounded Words.” In it I talked about how religious words, like God and prayer, have been usurped by conservative religious people. I spoke of how hard it is for progressive religious folk to use these words because they still hurt. We see the word God used in painful ways far too often.

One particularly egregious example is the man from Kansas who calls himself a Christian yet holds up posters at funerals saying, “God hates (and here he uses a particularly nasty word for gays and lesbians).” Though I am grateful that no one has ever been quite that horrible to me, I do remember the girl in High School who, upon learning that my view of God was not like hers, called me a “heathen” and berated me for my beliefs.

So I understand why God is a word to be used carefully. Yet, more and more Unitarian Universalists are re-discovering this word. And I think I know why.

One of my favorite authors on religious topics is the historian of religion Karen Armstrong. This past summer I picked up one of her more recent books called *The Case for God*. It’s one of a series she’s written about God, including *A History of God* and *The Battle for God*. All are wonderful—full of amazing breadth and insight. And though it’s possible she planned to write *The Case for God* when she was envisioning her earlier books, I think it is fair to say that she wrote it partly in response to the popular books on Atheism such as *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins and *God is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchens.

Intellectuals admire these books and I expect some of you have read them. I confess I haven’t. But I do know a bit of what they’re about; I have read a number of articles by these authors. And I understand how these writers have determined that the popular definition of God (male, all powerful, active in history, judgmental) is not worthy of their belief. (And one can argue that they have usurped the word Atheism, but I’ll leave that for Jaco to explore next week!)

As much as I understand what they’re trying to do, I struggle to appreciate these good people because they take their case *against* God in as radical a direction as fundamentalists take their case *for* God. They conclude that not only is God a bad idea, but so, too, is religion. And they have a tendency to smirk and act smug towards those of us for whom religion matters. And just

as I remember the taunts for being a heathen as a child, I have also been laughed at for being religious, and scorned for my chosen profession.

You see, I think religion is a good thing. But I also know that religion, in all its myriad forms, is not static. Religion has evolved in its ideas, particularly about God. And what may surprise you is that we actually haven't always evolved toward something more openhearted and open-minded when it comes to religion. In some ways, our ancient ancestors had a better understanding of what religion is for than we do today.

Karen Armstrong helps make this clear. One primary thesis of her many books is that humans learn and understand the world through two lenses. Armstrong believes that before the advent of modernity, people's lives were very different from our own. She writes (in *The Battle for God*) that pre-modern humans “evolved two ways of thinking, speaking and acquiring knowledge, which scholars have called *mythos* and *logos*. Both were essential; they were regarded as complementary ways of arriving at truth.”

Let's look first at Mythos. Spiritual myths help give people meaning and purpose. These religious stories of humanity (now mostly seen in ancient texts or in folk tales), were a pre-modern form of psychology; they helped people to understand their place in the world, and why it mattered if they lived or died.

Armstrong believes that these stories were *never* meant to be taken literally and usually weren't by the ones telling them. They were understood to be, well, mythical, but that did not lessen their import. Myths, like the story of the Exodus and Jesus' death, may have had some basis in history. But their historical veracity is not terribly important. What is more important is that mythical stories—in every culture and tribe across the globe—were used to help evolving humans understand what their life meant. Myths were timeless, and their timelessness allowed people to find themselves in them again and again, much as Jewish people do today when they recount the myth of Exodus at the annual Passover Seder.

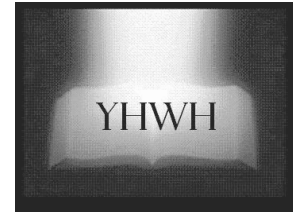
Logos, on the other hand, was “the rational, pragmatic, and scientific thought that enabled men and women to function well in the world.” Logos is very much concerned with how things work, with taking things apart, with the practical. Logos sees things as they are and does not attempt to find meaning in them.

It's important to understand that the earliest religious people who actually wrote things down (so we know something about them other than pictures and myths) expressed stories about the mystery that was all around them, the mystery of life and death and love and hope. They sought

to name this mystery. In some cultures they gave it many names. (Think of the Greeks for example.) But as monotheism emerged, the idea that this incredible mystery into which we are born and die was *one* powerful thing took root. People wanted to name the ultimate reality even as they knew it was ultimately unnamable.

Interestingly, our Jewish forebears realized that to call the Holy Mystery by a name, as we might call our brother, or our dog, just wasn't right. And so they came up with a way of writing the name of God without actually saying it.

Called the Tetragrammaton and often pronounced Yahweh, it is actually the early Jewish people's attempts to acknowledge the title of my sermon, that God is not God's name. You are forbidden to speak the name of God because it is too big a name for any one mouth.



As writing and education evolved over time, the meaning and purpose of religion began to change. In the earliest days it helped people understand their place in the world, taught them stories that showed them how to live, and gave them a sense that the world in all its harshness and beauty had meaning. As people began to read more and science began to suggest that all things could be measured and quantified, religion began to change. In some cases, it evolved toward mysticism, and there are examples in every culture and time period of religious people discovering a new way of understanding the mystery through, for example, ecstatic dancing (the Sufi dervishes), numerology (the Jewish Cabbala), visions and dreams (think Joan of Arc in Christianity), and hopeful beliefs in invincibility (the ghost dance of the Native Americans).

But it also evolved toward a hardened understanding of religion. People began to look at it not through the lens of myth but through the lens of logos, of rationality. People tried to “prove” the existence of God through reading the Bible as if it were a textbook. A classic example of this is the way people have tried to do the math in Genesis— okay, how old was Methuselah?— attempting to determine the age of the earth. It's why creationists have decided that there will be dinosaurs in the Garden of Eden—and they're both only 6000 years old!

It's ridiculous. And yet, we have often fallen into this trap as well. Our religious ancestors were all about science and reason. We are a faith born first from the Renaissance, when early scientists began to explore the cosmos (both the huge one out there via observable astronomy and the microcosmic interior universe via biology) and tried to make a rational view of God fit. They gave birth to the God of the Deists, who believed that God made the world and then backed off somehow. The Deist God gave way to a scientific view of reality with no room at all for God. And, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Humanism without God became the dominant religious perspective among Unitarian Universalists.

That should be all well and good. I'm a fan of humanism and in many ways consider myself a humanist. It's humane (no surprise there) and its teachings, as articulated in the Sources of our faith, "counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit."

But humanism has also led us to treat the mystery as if it were something we could take apart and put back together again. We read the Bible and point out all its inaccuracies, forgetting that the people who wrote it weren't striving for accuracy, or all that interested in facts (logos). They were looking for truth, some sense that they were a part of the story (the mythos) of the world.

I would like to gently suggest that many of us here in this room today are not so different from our ancient ancestors. We also want to understand our purpose. We want to find meaning and yes, maybe even a little hope. And we want to be able to encounter the mystery without quantifying it at every turn. In truth, we come here because we are religious people. And yet, because our dominant culture defines religiousness as believing in a literal God on high, and because that doesn't make sense to us or give our lives meaning, too often we come to believe our yearnings and our desire for connection to something greater than ourselves are not real.

Because we have been taught that God means only one thing, we reject God all together.

But as my friend and colleague Forrest Church reminded us, God is not God's name. It is simply a word some people use to describe their view of that which is greater than all yet present in each. At times it is a useful word. I use it when it feels right, particularly in environments when it allows others of a more traditional religious bent to feel included.

But, I don't use it very much (despite the number of times I've said it in this sermon!) because in our settings the word can be a block to inclusion. Yet, I need you to understand that I feel the Holy in my life every day.

I feel it (Him? Her?) when I get caught up in the beauty of a blue sky and a flock of birds in flight and I wonder at all the mysteries of the natural world.

When the people I love put their arms around me, I feel the greater love that flows through us all.

I know that something like God called me into being and will welcome my essence when it is my turn to die.

I am grateful for this knowledge, but it is not rational or scientific. I know this. I'm okay with it. Not everything that matters can be quantified and measured. As one of my favorite love songs (*Pippin* by Stephen Schwartz) puts it, "How can you define a look or a touch? How can you weigh a feeling?" The same is true of that great and holy mystery some call God.

Over the course of my life, I've been accused of being softheaded because God matters to me. At the same time I've been called a heathen because the God that matters to me isn't the standard issue Christian God. What's a girl to do?

What I choose to do is to spend my life in religious community, *this* community, where strict definitions of who and what God is matters a lot less than how we live out our belief in the oneness of all creation and the holy, essential element of love. I find myself uplifted by our open hearted approach to religion, our music that speaks to the many names of God, our willingness to understand faith not only through ancient scriptures and stories (as meaningful as they can be) but also through poetry, through the eyes of children, and through our own experience of, and here I quote our UU sources again, "that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life."

I experience that transcending mystery and wonder here each week when, in *your* presence, I also feel the presence of the God that wears many names. I love that our faith does not insist that we give the Holy only one name. But I also cherish that our religion allows us to experience the Holy through our encounters with nature and animals, through the love we feel for others, through quiet contemplation and rousing music.

I don't expect all of us here today to come to consensus on who or what God is or even whether or not we should use the word. What I would challenge us to do is to not fall into the trap of our fundamentalist brothers and sisters and insist that God is a petty tyrant who rules with an iron fist, and that of course we can't believe in *that* God! Instead, recognizing that God is not God's name, let us open our hearts to the wonder that is found in every moment. Let us allow ourselves time to feel deeply all the joy and pain of human living, and, when we come together like this each week, believe for a moment that the Holy really is among us, just as it was for our ancient ancestors.

Our faith has no creed or dogma. We do not ask that you pledge to believe in certain tenets to be a part of our community. Nor do we insist that you give God the same name as your neighbor or frankly, give God a label at all. Ancient Jewish people understood this when they refused to call God by any name. And faithful people all over the world today—in religions very much like ours

and completely different—offer up their hearts in praise to the great Unity, which is present in all creation and to the wonderful Love that springs forth in every time and place, when people of good will come together to make a difference, to share their lives and hopes and dreams, and to help one another become, as we say each week, “the best that we can be.”

It matters that we gather here each week to worship and remember who we are and why we choose to be in religious community. I know religion is imperfect, I know that throwing it all out may at times feel like the right choice. But I can’t let go of my faith in the amazing and powerful spirit of love and life that I feel here now, and at every moment. And so I believe in this church, and its faith, and our religion. Oh yes, and in God, too, though we are rarely on a first name basis.

And I believe in singing songs that speak to this. Join me in singing an African American Spiritual called *Over My Head*. Once again, let’s sing without the book. I’ll call out the words.

*Over my head, I hear music [singing... trouble... gladness...] in the air.  
There must be a God somewhere.*

### **CLOSING WORDS**

As we go forth this day, let us remember that nothing can trouble us or make us falter, if we live out of a place of love and unity, caring for each other and for our broken world.

And may we each be blessed by the presence of the Holy in our lives, and share that blessing with all who are in need of it.

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