

We are all seeking something in this life that we often call “God.” Many say “meaning” is what we seek most... reasons and a sense of purpose. I’m sure that most people also seek *feelings and experiences* of hope, peace, love and joy (as we pray every Advent/Christmas season), even if we are content to leave many questions about Life and God unanswered. Many Spiritual seekers say we are seeking a being or a Divine Presence. There are *many names* for God (and we know that many Jews insist that God is *beyond naming*) and “God” is an umbrella or universal name that seems to encompass all the other names of God.... ... The opening hymn, “Bring Many Names,” quickly became a favorite in the United Church of Christ. Whether address God as Warm Father, or Strong Mother, or Abba or Allah or Adonai or The Great I Am, or Creator God, or Loving God, or Holy One, or Great Spirit, etc. etc., we want to experience Divine Presence in real life, everyday experiences.

I enjoy reading devotionals, to see and learn how other people experience and name God. In the last days of March in the “These Days” devotional, Rev. Kelly Higgins of Canada had some great names for God: God of *laughter*, and God of *new things!* ... Let’s start with laughter. Is laughter divine? I sure think so! Remember, Jesus ate and drank with many different kinds of people; there had to be plenty of laughter... remember that Jesus’ enemies called him a glutton and a wine-lover? And I’ve oft noted that there is a portrait of Jesus laughing in the “Fellowship of Merry Christians.” Their newsletter is called “Joyful Noiseletter!” Rev. Kelly is a *grief* therapist, who writes beautifully about the God of laughter: “*Sorrow comes to us all, yet the good news is that laughter does return. You do not find laughter ... it finds you. One day, you will feel it start to grow in the darkness of your life. And joy will come bubbling forth, as it did for the psalmists.*” She says she reads the psalms when

she find it hard to laugh, to reaffirm her belief that amidst pain, there is also joy. I recall one Psalm that says it succinctly: “Weeping may tarry for the night, but Joy will come in the morning.” Yes, there is always a chance for laughter, even in times of pain and sorrow! And laughter is indeed a *gift* of God, a *grace* of God, since it usually catches us by surprise.

I want to emphasize this morning another way that Rev. Kelly named God: a “God of New Things.” So many ways we could look at this! But I think the most obvious affirmation for us is seen in NATURE... especially the season of Spring! Everything seems new. The sound of birds wake us up again, buds begin to leaf out, little shoots of green come up from something under the soil. Nature has its own testimony that there is always some new life, even inside of what may seem dead. The caterpillar seems dead in a cocoon, yet somehow, in life’s miracle, it changes into a beautiful butterfly!

Yes, starting with Nature, we believe in a “God of New Things!” This may be another way of saying that we have a “Creator God” who as Isaiah says, is “about to do a new thing.” How about the realm of people??? Of course! Our “God of New Things” is always giving humans opportunities for new life. As followers of Jesus, as disciples of Christ, we are very aware of his promises of New Life! We are aware that one core part of new life is GRACE. As forgiveness, it is always the experience of starting over, of letting go of hurts and grudges of the past. Practicing forgiveness is essential to be able to move on to “new things” that are waiting for us.

Another core part of our faith in a God of New things, is of course LOVE! Imagine... then as now, there is something “new” about putting Love first, as the most important of all the commandments! (Perhaps it is because the world has such a hard time loving!) Jesus said at the Last Supper that he was giving a

new commandment, that they love one another as he had loved them (deeply and sacrificially)... that they love each neighbor, even enemies, and create communities of love... to get outside of ourselves, to put all ego, pride, self-absorption aside and put others first.

Just as Grace can bring forgiveness and new life to an individually burdened soul, we can trust that Grace can point to “new things” to make our *communal* life better. And in this day and age, in a smaller world connected easily by airlines and wireless communication, Jesus principal command to love means to love the *world* community. It means finding love for those who are not part of our “tribe.” Finding love for strangers, yes even refugees. Think of the all the new friendships being made now in Poland, out of necessity, yes, but nevertheless new friendships, in a new culture, with a new language. Some my richest and eye-opening experiences in life were traveling and living in Spain and Latin American countries. In keeping with that, I know that I have often looked for people who are quite different from myself; we have much more to learn that way! In new friends, we can hear the God who says “I am about to do a *new thing!*” In grad school, at seminary, in the dining hall, it was usually much more interesting sitting at a table with the international students, or with African American or Korean American students (You may know there are a whole lot of Christians in South Korea, thanks to Presbyterian missionaries, who had often studied at Princeton Theological).

The “God of New Things” must have an interest in *interfaith dialogue* and peacemaking. We have had Christian-Jewish dialogues for years, since we share the same Bible. When I have time, I listen to Christian-Muslim dialogues also; One of the sayings from the Koran that I have come to value speaks of why God made

so many different people... and the answer is given that it is “so they can come to know one another”... in other words, learn from one another, grow with one another. This is our calling, to love every neighbor, to learn from them, to push each other a little in our growing edges, to become more tolerant and respectful of difference.

The Holy Spirit is obviously one name for the “God of New Things!” The apostle Paul insists that as we open to the Holy Spirit of Christ, we can continually change or “transform” for the better; Paul says we are changed from one degree of glory to the next. Paul is the poster child of *change for the better*, starting with persecuting and killing followers of Jesus, and eventually becoming chief spokesman for the new life that can be found in Christ. He experienced the Risen Christ first as a powerful and blinding light, then as a Presence and Spirit that filled him with love and with power. He loved being in the Spirit of Christ so much that as he said in this morning’s reading, he “counted all else as loss, as rubbish, compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ.”

We can all continually change for the better. One of the leading spokespersons for the “God of New Things” in the Christian Church is **Brian McLaren**. I’ve been reading his book, “The Great Spiritual Migration.” He insists that just as we see constant movement or migration in nature, we humans are also constantly changing and growing, so our views about God and our ways of following Jesus are naturally changing over time, and *must* change to avoid stagnation, death and decay. We know that people have killed and enslaved and dominated others in the name of Christ. McLaren says: “Unfortunately, religion has often become more of a *cage* than a *guide*, holding us back rather than summoning us onward.” As a

premier leader in “progressive Christianity,” he emphasizes the value in moving from a system of *beliefs* to a *way of life*.

I will revisit this theme of progressive Christianity often, a theme of the “emerging Church,” times of necessary change ... in theology and practice. But for now, I’d like to close with our confirmation from Nature, from the universal lessons of Springtime. Springtime beckons us, calls us, to try new things, to trust the “God of New Things.” One Springtime, I wrote a song that expresses these yearly hopes for new life:

Spring is Here Again, by Ross Varney

Refrain: Spring is here again, I can feel it in the air!
Spring is here again, there’s new life everywhere!
Flowers start to bloom, and the birds begin to sing,
It’s Springtime, come back again!

1. *Oh the things that we can do, now the sun is shining through,*
Time to get outdoors and start something new! (Refrain)
2. *Oh the places we can go, and explore, whatcha waiting for?*
Time for us to say, New Life, we’re on the way! (Refrain)