

GOD THE WHAT? WHAT OUR IMAGES FOR GOD SAY ABOUT GOD AND US

By Rev. Lynn Fonfara

I often think and preach in images and stories. Scripture uses stories and metaphors – or images – to describe one or more aspects of God. One of my favorite images of God is as the owner of a vineyard who hires all the day laborers at different times during the day. At the end of the day, they all receive the same very generous wage. This is an image of God as caring for all people in the same way, and blessing every one of us with divine abundance.

Some people speak and think of God as only Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And sometimes, we think of God as only Father, or only Son, or only Holy Spirit. There is nothing wrong with these names or images or metaphors for God. It's just that there are so many more.

In Scripture, God is described as mountain, smoke, and fire; mother hen sheltering me under her wings; she-bear, fiercely protecting her cubs; shepherd; king; lamb; lion; eagle; fortress; husband; owner of the vineyard. How many more can you name?

I have also been intrigued with non-scriptural images of God, and how they challenge me to think about God in new ways: Something; Collective Unconscious; Luminous Web; Ground of All Being; Source of all that Is; Mind of God; Womb; All; Jazz-Band Leader. What other images do you use to describe God?

When we use images to describe God, we tell ourselves and others what God is like, although any image is an imperfect description. God is as strong as a mountain, but God is not a mountain. God is like a mother hen, but God is not a mother hen.

Images for God also say what we believe about God. If we believe God is like a mother hen, we believe God will shelter us from the storms of life. If we believe God is our father, we may believe God has a powerful presence as well as a tender side, as do many fathers. If we believe God is a Jazz-Band Leader, we envision God guiding us with the main theme of love and grace, but allowing us to play our own riff.

If we listen to culture, we may believe that God only watches “from a distance” instead of being ever present through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. We may also believe that God as father is a strict disciplinarian who is more likely to criticize us than praise us.

Older adults have had many years for reflection about who God is and how we can relate to our amazing, mysterious, multi-faceted God. We know we can allow the Spirit to spark our creativity and increase our faith by using many images and metaphors for God. The more we use our imaginations to describe and image God, the more we will be able to grasp the fullness of who God is.

What images and metaphors for God are helpful to you today?

For more on this topic, these two books and many more will provide food for thought and creativity.

Bohler, Carolyn Jane, *God the What?: What Our Metaphors for God Reveal about Our Beliefs in God*, October, 2008, Skylight Paths Publishing.

McFague, Sallie, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, Fortress Press, 1987.

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