

“Can We Speak of God?”

The Rev. Laura Horton-Ludwig, Minister
First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton
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Those of you who have been to our fundraising auction know that one of the items up for bidding is the right to choose a sermon topic for me to preach on. This year Dwane Milnes was our winning bidder, and this is the AUUction sermon. So, if you like this service, you have Dwane to thank. And if you don't like it...I take full responsibility. I do, because I think the topic that Dwane chose is marvelous. He asked me to preach on the latest book by Karen Armstrong, which right away was both intimidating and exciting, because her books are always meaty and challenging and full of a learning that goes really deep.

Karen Armstrong is a scholar who used to be a Catholic nun. She lost her faith and left the Catholic church when she was still quite young. For years she considered herself an atheist. She worked as a TV journalist creating programs about world religions, and eventually, slowly, she found her faith evolving into something that today she calls “freelance monotheism.” For about 20 years now she has been writing a series of brilliant books on the history of world religions. She's been tracing the connections and similarities between religions so that people of different faiths, people who might think they have nothing in common, might recognize that we really are all talking about the same thing, one divine reality, one human condition, however much our ideas and our words differ.

Karen Armstrong's latest book,
the one Dwane has asked me to preach on today,
is called *The Case for God*. Now, I must tell you:
this is a fantastic book with possibly the worst title I've ever heard!
What I mean by that is,
the title does *not* tell you what the book is about.
I figured a book called *The Case for God* would maybe be
a historical rehash of all the different intellectual arguments
people have used through the ages to debate whether God exists.
Which, to me, would just not be that exciting.
To me, that's not all that relevant to *our* lives and *our* questions.

But that's not it at all.
What she's really up to is something very different.
Her book is actually a study of
different traditions of spiritual practice,
traditions that are present in every major world religion
that were designed to show us that whatever we call "God"
cannot be known or even spoken about with any certainty.
These traditions of practice
teach us that all our ideas about "God" or not-God,
all our concepts, all our words that we use
to try to describe our sense of the holy, the sacred, the divine—
all of our ideas and words are completely inadequate.
And ultimately they invite us into a state of awareness
beyond speech, beyond rational thought,
in which knowledge and trust and peace
can be sensed and experienced in a way that is profoundly sustaining.

Has anyone ever heard of the idea of a Zen Buddhist *koan*?
A koan is sort of like a riddle,
only it's a riddle that can't be solved with rational thought.
Have you ever heard anyone ask,
What is the sound of one hand clapping?

That's one example of a koan.

In the Zen tradition, the student is given one of these koans to meditate on.

You're told that there is a correct answer, and you'll know it when you find it.

So you think on it and think on it, but the rational mind cannot solve it.

It's designed to break through all your conventional ways of seeing the world, everything you think you know, and basically it's designed to make your head explode—well, not literally, but, say, to catapult you to another level of perception that can't be described, only experienced.

The Zen tradition calls it *satori*.

We translate it as *enlightenment* or *awakening*.

Now, koan practice is just one example.

We may be most familiar with these kinds of practices as they exist in Asian religions,

but what Karen Armstrong really wants us to understand

is that this kind of spiritual discipline

exists in *every* major religious tradition,

including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—

these exercises which can be taught and practiced,

which invite us into a questioning

of everything we think we know about God or not-God,

are present in *every* tradition, and so they are available to *us* as well.

Let me try to flesh this out with another example,

this time from the Christian tradition.

Right around the start of the 6th century—

that's Common Era, or A.D.—there lived

a Greek-speaking Christian writer who called himself

Denys the Areopagite (*pronounced "Ab-ree-OP-uh-gite"*),

or Dionysus in the Eastern Orthodox tradition.

Now, I suspect you probably have not heard of this guy,
but in the Middle Ages a *lot* of people read his work and studied it.
Here's what he was up to.¹

Denys was a Christian.

He was used to hearing and using language
that tried to describe what God was like.

By the way, I want to say a word on language.

Denys was in an environment
where using “God”-language was taken for granted,
so I'm going to follow his lead just for now,
but please always keep in mind, when I say God,
I don't mean it's the *only* name
for whatever it is we mean when we say it.

But that was the name that was most familiar in Denys's culture.

So—Denys starts by pointing out
there are a whole lot of places in the Bible that say what God is like.
Sometimes the Bible says God is like a rock.
Sometimes it says God is like the sea, or the sky,
or like a mighty warrior.

And Denys says, mostly we are all perfectly capable
of understanding that all of this is just metaphor.

It's not literally true.

He says, we know God is not literally a rock, or the sea, or the sky,
or a warrior like a human being could be.

But we *also* say God is good.

We say God is wise.

We say God is a unity.

And Denys says, here is where things get really tricky.

Because we *think* we know what we mean when we say those things,
but when we stop and think, we have to admit,

we actually have *no idea* what it means to say that God is good.

First of all we have to admit that this word “God” is a label

¹ See Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God* (New York: Knopf, 2009), pp. 123–29.

for something we simply do not and cannot understand
with rational thought—and *something* isn't even the right word either.
Is God a person? Obviously not.
Is God a thing? No.
Is God a being? Not really.
And as we go through all these questions,
we have to admit we have *no idea* what God is.

And this is hard enough to take in,
but Denys pushes it farther and says, wait, we're not done:
it's not enough to realize that we have to deny
everything we think we know about God.
It's not enough to say God is not a person or a thing or a being.
It's not enough to say God is not good or wise or one
in any sense we can understand.
We have to go farther and realize our unknowing is so profound,
we can't even say what God is *not*.

Here's what Denys says:
“God...is not understood; nothing can be said of [God];
[God] cannot be named.
[God is not one of the things that are,
nor is [God] known in any of the things that are;
[God] is all things in everything and nothing in anything.”²
That which we are used to calling “God,”
“the pre-eminent Cause of all things,” is neither large nor small;
it neither moves nor stays still;
it is not light or dark; it is not false or true;
it neither exists nor does not exist.
He says, our reason cannot name it or know it;
it transcends everything we know and everything we can imagine.³
With all our words and all our powers of rational thought,
we actually have *no idea* who or what God might be.

² Denys the Areopagite, *The Divine Names*, quoted in Armstrong, *The Case for God*, p. 125.

³ Denys the Areopagite, *The Mystical Theology*, ch. 5, translated at
<http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeII/MysticalTheology.html>.

Our words fail us.
Our reason fails us.
So we fall silent, speechless—
and in contemplation without words, without thoughts,
our mind may begin to sense
that which cannot be spoken of or understood.

So, through this practice of meditation
on the limits of language and thought,
we come to understand it is impossible to say
that which we call God *is* or *is not*.
But beyond the duality of *is* and *is not*
we can begin to sense *something*.

This is very hard to talk about,
so let me try to come at it sideways.
We might be able to hear it more easily
through the lens of other religious traditions.

You may have heard the opening chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*:

The tao that can be told
is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named
is not the eternal Name.⁴

Or the Hindu practice of meditating on absolute reality
by saying *Neti neti: not that, not that, not that*.
Whatever we think absolute reality might be,
we are asked to practice saying, *not that, not that*.
Our words fail us. Our concepts fail us.
That which is beyond being and non-being
is not dependent on our words or our concepts.

⁴ *Tao Te Ching* 1, trans. Stephen Mitchell.

Or I look at the Japanese Buddhist symbol of the *ensō*,
the circle drawn all in one stroke,
with both concentration and freedom—
one example is on your order of service.
The *ensō* is both completeness and emptiness,
the circle encompassing all
and the emptiness within and around it.
And in contemplation
we too are invited into this dance of being and nonbeing,
presence and non-presence.

There's a story about the Buddhist tradition that speaks here too.
It is said a Christian woman once visited a Buddhist teacher
to talk about her faith,
and in the course of the conversation she said,
“The one thing I really cling to is my faith in God.
I know God will never abandon me,
no matter what I'm going through.”
The Buddhist teacher, with great gentleness, said to her,
“That belief is causing you many problems and difficulties.
You should try to let go of it if you can.”

And I don't think the teacher meant to say
there was no such thing as God,
or if there were, that God was going to abandon her—
but rather, every human idea we have about God or not
is so limited, it cannot be true in the deepest sense.
And what is so very important to understand is this:
giving up our certainties about God or not-God
doesn't mean there is no more truth,
no more comfort when we are struggling and suffering.
It's not that.
But we are called to let go in order to get to a deeper place,
a truer place,
a firmer ground.

Because what countless people of faith have testified
over and over again
is that if we can relinquish all our ideas,
all our words about that which has been called God,
what lies beyond is knowledge so deep it cannot be shared,
only experienced;
and peace so deep, it cannot be spoken,
that peace which passeth understanding;

Today, the world is full of people, of every faith,
who think they have the truth about God.
We live in a world that has been battered by religious violence.
Our world needs a new understanding of religious truth.
We need so much more humility,
so much less certainty.
But at the same time we need so much more boldness
in our religious lives—that boldness which can
“Search and search again without losing hope.”⁵
Without fear, in a spirit of trust and freedom,
may we seek “the mystery at the core of the universe and ourselves.”⁶
And may we touch that deeper truth which lies beyond words,
beyond thought.
May all who seek be found.

So may it be.
Amen.

⁵ Mohammed Iqbal, *Singing the Living Tradition* #610.

⁶ Nita Penfold, “A Lesson on the Mystery” (Spirit Play story).