



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH  
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

Preached by Bruce Sanguin

John 8: 56-59; John 17:11-13;

A Reading from Biophysicist, John Platt

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## “The Three Faces of God<sup>1</sup>”

If you are of a certain age and have been a member of a church for decades you may not know what I'm about to tell you. It is this: the so-called spiritual, but not religious people – let's call them SBNR' for shorthand – in this city secretly think that you are a bit of a lightweight, when it comes to spiritual matters. Many think this because you worship God as though God was a Person – with a capital “P”. They may think it's rather sweet that you could actually believe that there is a Big Daddy out there taking care of your every desire and calming your every fear. But your predilection for closing your eyes and talking to God or singing devotional hymns is rather like spiritual nursery school.

The SBNR's also have a thing against “belief-based” religion. To put it simply, creeds are not credible to them. Many are certain that we in the church “believe in God” but we rarely actually *experience* God. In the absence of this direct experience, they have us pegged as the religion that is all about “obeying” an external God, out of fear or guilt. The SBNR who remembers anything about the Bible at all point to passages in the First Testament that depict this personal God as jealous, wrathful, at times violent, and who could occasionally act in rather arbitrary ways. Jesus is OK for the

SBNR, but he needs to be stripped clean of all the “institutional” baggage.

On the other hand, mainline churches are rather suspicious of SBNR types, especially the so-called New Thought or New Age spirituality. We secretly believe that they have elevated themselves to god-like status. In the absence of any God outside of themselves, they look inside and find God there. But us “organization religion” types ask: how do you know if all of this God-within talk doesn't simply result in a massive projection of your own ego onto Spirit – a narcissistic spirituality to go with a narcissistic age? Where do you locate your ethical muscle? If it's within, isn't there a danger that it deteriorates into flabby moral relativism – you do your thing, I'll do mine. I'm not going to judge you. So you don't judge me. My feelings, my thoughts, my choices attain an almost sacred status. Yes, many mainliners regard these folks as a bit flaky and woo-woo.

To add another layer to the mix, there are a whole bunch of people – call them the eco-camp – who don't know what all the fuss is about. Nature is their religion. If you want to talk about Spirit, then talk about the Great Web of Interconnectedness; talk about Gaia, the planetary system that nurtures and sustains us; talk about the

mystery of quantum physics and cosmology. Look through a telescope at the night skies and get lost in wonder. You don't need either an Old Man in the sky or the New Age, God-is-Within framework to live your life. God is the Great Cosmic System. The evolutionary process have made us moral creatures, provided brains to reason our way through life's difficulties, and hearts that are evolutionarily adapted to love – in the best interests of survival. It's all quite mysterious and quite wonderful. Nature is their spirituality, and why anybody would want to sit in a dark church when they could be outside hiking is beyond them.

Well, philosopher Ken Wilber has done humanity a great service at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He calls for an end to the culture wars between these different expressions of our spiritual intelligence. So, the first step is to recognize that each one of them is, in fact, a valid and important expression of spiritual intelligence. In fact, we need to be able to move back and forth between all three if we intend to fashion a healthy spiritual practice.

He calls them the Three Faces of God: God in 1<sup>st</sup> person or the Great I Am; God in 2<sup>nd</sup> person or the Great I – Thou, the Beloved Other; and God in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, or the Great I – It. An evolutionary Christian spirituality will teach and practice all three forms.

Perhaps you can guess which of the three the United Church of Canada privileges? Yes, practically all of our

hymns, most of our Scripture, the prayers we say and read together on Sunday morning address God as though God was a Person, with whom we may be in conversation: God as the Great Thou. We expect that God will be attentive and responsive. We are in *relationship* with God. My understanding of why the SBNR are suspicious of this God is that we, as the mainline church, have not really incorporated an evolutionary model as it relates to God in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person.

When it comes to human relationships, say with our parents, we naturally judge that if we relate to them at the age of 35 or 40 the way we related to them when we were 2, or 10, or 17, we should probably seek some help. For example, when we are very young right up through our teens, we naturally need our parents to do stuff for us. We are literally dependent on them for life at the age of 2. We need them to provide resources. We may even demand things from them. As we mature, we become less dependent. Our relationship is less about asking for stuff and more about discovering who are parents are, separate and apart from us. We begin to see them, distinct from us. But how often, in mainline Christian churches, do we act as though God is the Parent and we are still the two-year old or 10 year-old? We expect God to protect us, provide for us, and wrap us in the blanket at night before we go to bed. We pray to God to give us stuff. We expect God to be able to control life's circumstances – just like we expected mommy or daddy to do for us – we

may even throw a tantrum and cut ourselves off from God.

Remember how Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “when I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; but when I became an adult I put away my childish ways?” (1 Corinthians 13). Well, I’m afraid that the SBNR’s have this much right. If we’ve made it to adulthood, but our relationship with God as Beloved Other hasn’t evolved, and we’re still approaching God as a 10 year old, then we have some growing up to do. If we’re still praying, “God, give me stuff. God do this for me”, when it is within our power to do it for ourselves, we have some growing up to do.

At a certain point in our relationship with our parents, it’s all about just realizing your love and affection for them. You feel grateful for what they’ve given you, and you simply want to give back. You see them for who they are, not for what you expected of them when you were a child. And so it is with the Great Thou or the Beloved Other. At some point it’s all about our love for God, and our innermost desire for devotion. This is not because God demands it – what kind of person does? – but because of simple gratitude and a desire to acknowledge the Source of all life. Prayer becomes devotional. It’s about listening for the divine, rather than reciting our wish list. It’s more about letting go, not getting something.

And please remember, all of you SBNR’s, when we’re talking about

God as “Person”, we’re really not imagining God literally as a person; God is certainly not *less* than what we mean by personhood, but rather includes and transcends what we mean by that term. Remember it took 14 billion years to arrive at personhood – the capacity to empathize, rationalize, take alternative perspectives to our own, transcend our own biological limits, and create our preferred future. Personhood is a very evolved manifestation of the cosmos. (Our boss may be the exception, I realize.) So, it’s only natural that when we are striving for metaphors for the Unnamable, personhood is an obvious and legitimate metaphor.

But listen, we have something to learn from our SBNR friends, our New Thought and New Age brothers and sisters, who realize that God in 2<sup>nd</sup> person doesn’t tell the whole story. There is another face of God that comes to us from every mystical tradition of every great religion. This is God as the Great I Am and the mainline church has an almost phobic aversion to this face of God. Here, God is experienced as the ground of our own being. Through meditation, and occasionally spontaneously, we experience such a profound sense of unity that the boundaries of our ego dissolve and separateness is revealed as illusion – separateness from creation, which is called Nature mysticism and separateness from Spirit – which is non-dual mysticism. There is only one, and only Oneness, and who we are at our deepest level is an expression of this Oneness. Those who have tasted this spiritual state typically experience

the loss of worry; fear of death disappears because what has been revealed is that death as a permanent state is also an illusion. All things, including our loved ones, and ourselves come and go, but the Oneness, the eternal, always simply Is. And that Awareness of Oneness is who we are at the deepest level. We are not that of which we are aware, but rather that which is aware. That awareness has always been and always will be and if we can know it at any moment if we choose to enter the Present, the Now, as Mr. Tolle so eloquently writes.

When the author of John's gospel has Jesus say, "Before Abraham was, I Am", Jesus is reflecting this consciousness. This is a flabbergasting, even blasphemous, claim for those who have never experienced God as the Great I Am. But the truth is that spiritual intelligence is profoundly accelerated or deepened by such experiences. The church needs to be going back to its mystics – as we have been doing through our courses in mysticism and Centerpoint – in order to validate and legitimize this way of seeing God. For example, Meister Eckhart, a 13<sup>th</sup> century Christian mystic thought that "Isness" was about the best name for God he could come up with – the Isness that always and everywhere just "is" and which we can experience by fully inhabiting the Now.

Here's the danger of getting stuck in this 1<sup>st</sup> person face of God, however. It's relatively easy, through instruction and a little practice to taste

this spiritual state. But the ego is a tricky little beggar and will quickly appropriate this experience for itself and begin to imagine that "I am God" – but the "I" here is the ego, boundaried and separate and tempted always to puff itself up. From this place, we hear claims like "I can just imagine anything I want, a million dollars, and it will magically manifest. So some new age thought – not all by any means – becomes little more than narcissism run amuck. This is why a good dose of devotional spirituality – 2<sup>nd</sup> person face of God – is healthy. The ego doesn't do devotion. The ego does self-promotion. This is why 1<sup>st</sup> person needs 2<sup>nd</sup> person, and why 2<sup>nd</sup> person needs 1<sup>st</sup> person.

Finally, the 3<sup>rd</sup> face of God is the experience of God through nature. The astounding mystery of creation just keeps getting more astounding with each scientific discovery. Cosmology, biology, quantum physics, and chaos theory all point a remarkable cosmic, evolutionary intelligence at work. We are members of a vast, system of interconnected parts that form a Great Whole, a system that maintains an elegance balance necessary for life to thrive on the planet. Each part of this Great System is a microcosm of the whole – a holographic representation of everything that came before it. That's true of us as well. We are concentrated amalgams of the entire evolutionary process. We are one with this great system and with all life forms.

But notice my language: Great System, a Great Whole, holograms,

evolutionary intelligence. The language isn't personal, is it? It's the language of science, and even when it's poetically stated, the source of the Mystery here is the external world of forms, not the interior world of Personhood or Consciousness. It's standing at the top of the Grand Canyon and being overwhelmed by the majesty of what you are seeing. It's looking through a microscope or a telescope and seeing the mysterious workings of the universe in a cell or a solar system. Science is a legitimate and valid form of spiritual intelligence. For many of our best scientists nature is face of God – they just wouldn't necessarily use personal language or the language of the mystic.

The church also needs to incorporate this 3<sup>rd</sup> face of God into our singing, our prayers, and our sermons. (Notice our final hymn when we come to sing it.) Too often our prayers ignore our bodies, our planet, and our cosmos as though these are divorced from Spirit. Christians of all people – we who claim that God comes to us in flesh and blood – should have a place to honour creation as a face of God. We need to develop the spiritual line of intelligence known as earth literacy. My book *Darwin, Divinity, and the Dance of the Cosmos* explored this 3<sup>rd</sup> person face of God.

Here's an interesting thing: each of these faces may flow into the other. What I mean is that each can serve as a portal into a different face of God. For example, Dr. James Lovelock first came up with Gaia as a name for the thin envelope called the biosphere that

keeps all the earth's systems in delicate balance. Gaia to him was, and still is, an "It" – he certainly never intended for Gaia to be interpreted literally as personal. But that Great It has indeed for many people morphed into a Thou. Gaia is literally ascribed the qualities of personal intelligence and receives the devotions of many spiritual people. It morphed into Thou. This is fine, as long as we consciously know what we are doing. Then again, many people report that by going deeply into their devotion of God, The Beloved Other becomes a portal into the Great I Am and they experience union with Spirit. And again, unitive experiences born of the Great I Am, with both Spirit and nature can act as portals into an impulse to praise, celebrate, and serve the Beloved Other. Fluidity is the key. Access to all three faces enriches our spiritual life.

The church needs to welcome back the Great I Am face of God and the great I – It, and rather than be threatened by these faces of Mystery, embrace them, teach them, and practice them.

I'll end with a poem I included in my book, *Darwin, Divinity, and the Dance of the Cosmos* by the Sufi poet, Rumi, who has some wise counsel:

God comes to you in whatever image you have been able to form of God;

the wiser and broader and more gorgeous the image,

the more the grace and power can flow from the Throne into your heart:

God is saying... “ I am where  
my Servant thinks of Me:  
whatever image my Servant  
forms of Me, there I will be.

I am the servant of my servant’s  
image of Me.  
Be careful then, My servants,  
and purify, attune, and expand  
your thoughts about Me,  
for they are My House”.