

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

## Beyond All Naming

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## FIRST READING

*Glen Thomas Rideout, Director of Worship and Music at First Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Ann Arbor*

god is no noun.  
and certainly not an adjective.  
god is at least a verb,  
and even that shrinks her.

god is not so much a woman  
...as she resides in the improbable  
hope of brown mothers.

god is not so much a man  
...as he is at work in the memory  
of my grandfather's laugh.

god is not trans.  
god swims in the tears  
of the one who sees  
her real self,  
at long last,  
in the bathroom mirror.

god is not black; neither is he white.  
god is wading in the contradiction

of songs from slave shacks.  
and I have seen god in the alabaster smiles  
of children at play.

we're getting michelangelo all wrong.  
god is not the bearded one surrounded by angels,  
floating over the sistine.  
he is not adam with his muscled back pressing the earth.  
no.  
god is the closing inch of space  
between their reaching fingers.

don't believe for a moment

that god is catholic. for god's sake, he isn't even human.

have you heard the wood thrush  
when the sun glistens the huron?  
can you see the flowers,  
how they speak to bees without a word?

still, god is no spring blossom, no wood thrush.  
god is neither the sun nor the bee.  
god is what you *see* in the blossom.  
god is when you hear the river  
and suddenly discover how  
much of it is part of you.

to be clear,  
god is not *you*.  
god is somewhere in the 14 billion years  
which have come to mean that you *are*.  
god is, after all, at least a verb.  
she is neither pharaoh's rod nor moses' staff.  
*we* must be the ones to cease our slavery.  
she is not interested in blame,  
neither does she offer praise...

god is at least a verb,  
singing in the rare silences between rapid opinions,  
attending the tears of dark-skinned deaths,

learning in tiny, alabaster smiles.

god is waiting in the space between fingers  
that might connect.

he is waiting for us  
to stop naming her.  
she is waiting for us to  
see all of him.

god is waiting  
to be un-shrunk

## SECOND READING

*Bernice Johnson Reagon, historian and artist*

I Remember, I Believe

I don't know how my mother walked her trouble down  
 I don't know how my father stood his ground  
 I don't know how my people survived slavery  
 I do remember, that's why I believe

I don't know why the rivers overflow their banks  
 I don't know why the snow falls and covers the ground  
 I don't know why the hurricane sweeps through the land every now and then  
 Standing in a rainstorm, I believe

I don't know why the angels woke me up this morning soon  
 I don't know why the blood still runs through my veins  
 I don't know how I rate to run another day  
 I am here still running, I believe

My God calls to me in the morning dew  
 The power of the universe knows my name  
 Gave me a song to sing and sent me on my way  
 I raise my voice for justice, I believe.

## Beyond All Naming

There's a story in the Hebrew bible about the prophet Elijah, who has been called out to serve the cause of God. He is a champion, a soldier, a fighter, an activist for the Lord; he defeats many armies and slays countless enemies but they keep rising up, from beyond the kingdom and within, and in time Elijah grows weary; he's worn down, he stumbles and then he grows afraid. The enemies are very fierce and they mean to kill him, so Elijah runs away from the battlefield. He hides under a tree, and in the morning an angel is there, with food and water – a warm cake and fresh water. The angel says, "Eat Elijah. You will need food for your journey." Elijah eats, but he does not come out. He does not want any journey anymore. The next morning, the angel comes again, and after that Elijah flees to a cave. In the night a voice awakens him there, the voice of God, who has discovered him, who asks "What are you doing here, Elijah?" The prophet answers that the people have betrayed him, enemies are all around, and he is tired and afraid and wants to die. God tells him to go outside and listen. Elijah stands there all alone, and before his eyes a mighty storm comes up:

*a great and strong wind rent the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks ... but God was not in the wind. And after the wind came an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but God was not in the fire. And after the fire – a still small voice. And when Elijah heard it he wrapped his face in his mantle. And behold the voice came again, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"*

Quietly, methodically, in the stillness inside the storm, gently, but firmly, God lays out the next thing Elijah should do, and it's a small thing. And then the next thing is laid out, another small thing, not a mighty thing, like "Would you please get back out there and take down the entire evil empire?" But a small thing, a small deliberate step. Elijah listens, and all the tiny steps and small actions that Elijah, the great warrior and prophet, is given now to do, all of them lead, eventually, to the placing of his mantle upon the shoulders of another prophet called to take it up.

We are not called to save the whole wide world, all by ourselves or ever. We are called to take up our corner, our tiny section of the beautiful, frayed tapestry, and begin the work of repair. That's all of us, no matter how you voted. The racism, the bigotry, the bullying, the dangers that we see now all were here before the election, they're just exposed now, and no matter how you voted, there's work for each of us to do. Some are activists, some are prophets, some are teachers, some are parents, some are artists, some run for office, some shine their light by wearing safety pins or buttons, or leave love notes for their neighbors in sidewalk chalk or snow paint; some work for change in agencies, serving poor people, or people with disabilities, or immigrants, or in women's clinics; some are environmental leaders; some are volunteers. Each of us holds our small corner- but some of us are shaken and none of us can clearly see what our most effective work should be right now. What could possibly make a difference? We're tired and afraid, beset with danger all around. We're like Elijah in the story, and like him, we are called to listen now, to listen hard – not only to the news, or the cacophony of media posts raging all around us like a storm. You don't have to stay plugged in, tuned in, logged on, 24 hours a day. It's brutal. Schedule a media fast, sometimes, for we are called now to a different listening.

If our church had a bell it would be ringing;  
 if we had a cantor, she'd be calling;  
 if there were a minaret on our building and a *muezzin* appointed, he'd be singing the *adhan*, the call to worship, call to prayer, entreating us to listen, at least five times a day.

Listen to the still, small voice, within you, maybe, or without – the voice of that to which you pray, whatever voice of deepest wisdom speaks to you. We're called to listen acutely for it now, to practice what one poet calls "a severer listening."

What do you really believe in?

What do you love?

What specifically do you care about, as a citizen, as a person?

What basic principles, core convictions, ethical commandments do you live by and live for?

To what, in the days ahead, the years ahead, are you prepared to testify, not just with your words, your opinions and ideas, but with your heart and hands, the evidence of your life?

*What are you doing here, said the voice out of the whirlwind, and what will you do next?*

Sometimes, in moments of crisis, moments of confusion, shock, despair, sometimes like Elijah, we have to go away to find the way, step away from the newsfeed and the argument and the fray, go deep within and listen for the inner truth that steadies us and readies us and which will call us out again, into the work of justice, into the work of civic compassion, into the work of truth-speaking and public witness, the work of sacrifice and struggle, the hard work of hope, the holy

work of radical imagination. What will restore your soul for that, not in a comforting, comfortable way, but in ways that will keep you awake, eyes and heart and mind and hands unflinchingly open to the trouble of our time- awake and ready to answer? What keeps you strong and clear and keeping on?

Bernice Johnson Reagon, historian, artist, activist, wrote in a beautiful song that she had no idea what the sources of faith and strength might be. She only had the evidence of history, the example of her parents, the living proof of her own existence, to show that faith and strength had prevailed in the past:

*I don't know how my mother walked her trouble down  
I don't know how my father stood his ground  
I don't know how my people survived slavery  
I do remember, that's why I believe*

*I don't know why the angels woke me up this morning soon  
I don't know why the blood still runs through my veins  
I don't know how I rate to run another day  
I am here still running, I believe*

*My God calls to me in the morning dew  
The power of the universe knows my name  
Gave me a song to sing and sent me on my way  
I raise my voice for justice, I believe.*

The work of the church – any church or congregation, any religion or faith, including ours- is of course to comfort the afflicted, to hold those who mourn, to mark the milestones of sorrow and joy with sacraments and move through the wheel of the year with glad celebrations and solemn observance. The work of the church is comfort and community, of course – but the work of the church, the work of this church, is as well and at the same time prophetic work, disruptive work:

to speak truth to power,  
to bear witness to injustice, persecution and oppression wherever they appear,  
to raise the flag of conscience on the public square,  
to turn the tables, the economic tables, of exclusion, wealth and corporate influence;  
to proclaim not just in words but in tangible action  
    welcome to the stranger,  
    reverence for the living earth,  
    liberation to the prisoner,  
    full equality to the brown, the black, the queer, the differently abled, the outcast and the downcast.

The work of the church is never merely charity, but the transformation of the broken world. This once was called *the social gospel*. To live it out, the church, which is to say, the people, each person, must be brave and strong, and clear in our conviction, anchored in our faith. The work before us is religious work; it is prophetic, not just political. And in these early days of post-

election reckoning, we need to do our first work first, one by one by one: recollect our principles, remember who we are, reaffirm our highest aspirations, and wrestle with our deepest fear – all of which is the work of prayer.

*God of many names and beyond all naming....*

I often start like that, when I pray out loud, because God does have many names, spoken by believers in a thousand languages, and by non-believers too. The names are not important, but the impulse- to cry out, to bow down, to lift up in gratitude or wonder a sense of awe or thankfulness, to whisper longing for forgiveness, or simply ask for wisdom – these impulses are universal, they are symptoms of our humanness. The need to pray, whether you believe in God or not, crosses every border – so I say “god of many names,” and come into communion then with all who speak those names and all those who ever have.

I say “beyond all naming,” because God is exactly that. Like Glen Rideout in the reading, I believe God is no noun, but something that

*...resides in the improbable hope of brown mothers...*

*...swims in the tears of the person who sees their real self, the trans person who sees their real self at long last in a bathroom mirror.*

God has no name, but swims in our tears.

*God is neither black nor white, says the poet, but wades in the contradiction of songs from slave shacks.*

*God is in the closing inch of space between the reaching fingers on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel;*

*God is not the woodrush nor the blossom, nor the sun nor the bee, but what moves in you when you meet them in the forest.*

*God is what takes place when you understand a river as related to you.*

*God is waiting to be un-shrunk.*

*He is waiting for us to stop naming her.*

God is no noun, but inhabits our verbs. God dwells in the small actions, the daily choices, that define our lives, the countless decisions that betray our true allegiances. God is that to which we turn when we don't know where to turn. When we're numb and exhausted and scared, it is where we go to remember who we are and what we love and what is ours to do – like Elijah. God is beyond all naming, but we get closer when we name the things we know: the brokenness, the beauty, everything that's true.

So I, who believe in no kind of God that the church of my childhood could recognize, I say in times of trouble, *God of many names and beyond all naming, hear my prayer. Help me to remember what I love and what I know and what is mine to do. Quiet my fears. Steady my resolve. Strengthen my compassion. Amplify my humility and my courage, both, that I may find my work today and do it with a glad and grateful heart.*

We are not called to save the whole wide world, all by ourselves or ever, but we are called, each one of us, to redeem the corner that is ours. I don't know how we can do it, how we can go forward in the days before us now, without some kind of grounding for the spirit. I don't know how we head into Thanksgiving, all those relatives, all those recipes for disaster, those turkeys dressed with discord and rancor, without some kind of grounding for the spirit. It's not about winning arguments at dinner, or at work or on Facebook, or anywhere. It's about keeping the faith, your own lamp brightly burning.

There is so much noise out there, and there's no doubt that we are called as never before to pay attention and to make some serious noise ourselves; this is no time to be silent. And yet and still, to find your voice and trust it, you might listen for the voice of God, even if you don't believe in God, the still, small voice within. Go deep in these hard days, even into silence. Allow space for the absence of answers, and dispel the easy explanations that cannot hold the weight of sadness or fear or anger or shock. Avoid anesthetizing arguments that make you smug or despondent or both. Resist self-righteousness and blame. Breathe deep, and stay awake. Listen hard, severely, in the terrifying whirlwind, for the deepest truth you know. This is all the practice of prayer, and for me, heading out now into this new landscape where we live, which is not new and yet is, for me it is prerequisite.

Cornel West, Christian socialist and teacher, wrote this week,

*In this bleak moment, we must inspire each other driven by a democratic soulcraft of integrity, courage, empathy and a mature sense of history – even as it seems our democracy is slipping away. As one whose great family and people survived and thrived through slavery, Jim Crow and lynching, I know the neofascist rhetoric and predictable authoritarian reign is just another ugly moment that calls forth the best of who we are and what we can do. For us in these times, to even have hope is too abstract, too detached, too spectatorial. Instead we must **be** a hope, we must be participants, we must be a force for good as we face this catastrophe together.*

Activists, freedom-fighters, prophets of a transformed world: the battlefield *will* call us out. So pace your work. It's not yet time to pass the mantle on, and we need each other strong and faithful for the long, long haul.

Spirit of life and love,  
 God of many names, and beyond all naming,  
 beyond what we can see from where we stand, here in late November,  
 help us to name what we do see.  
 Strengthen us for the work ahead.  
 No matter how we voted, we're all in this together now.  
 Help us to remember what we love and live for.

Give us the courage this week as we gather with our families,  
with people whom we love and who love us.  
Make us brave to speak the truth in love,  
to steer hard conversations toward harder questions,  
open questions,  
not arguments, but cries of the spirit:

What about the poor?  
What about people who are hungry, homeless, mentally ill,  
the ones for whom no place is set at our table of abundance?  
What about those families, those children,  
who flee poverty or war or gangs or rape or threat of death to come here,  
who have no place else on this earth to go?  
What about our Muslim neighbors?  
What about our queer family,  
so many beloveds so profoundly at risk?  
What about our planet earth?

Spirit of life, beyond all names and naming,  
help us to hold what matters most,  
and help us hold together.

Bless the food to our use, and our lives to glad service.

Amen.

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