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First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Text: Song of Songs 1:5; 3:1; 5:2-9; 6:3; 7:10, Luke 13:31-34, Isaiah 11: 6-9
June 29th, 2025

On a Queer Day, We Can See Forever

A cause for celebration and our gratitude today go to the people of Budapest, who were told by their government not to march in the Pride Parade, and then over 100,000 people did. They help us to look forward and to see more clearly what may be possible, but first we step back over 100 years to another country close to Hungary.

When fascism was on the rise in 1930s Germany, many intellectuals fled to other countries. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian, was already in America on an exchange program studying at Union Seminary in New York City. He decided to return to Germany and to join the resistance.

Bonhoeffer became the pastor of a small group of committed Christians with a low-profile, non-public, intense loyalty to Jesus; but they also interacted as "incognito Christians" with all kinds of people in the secular realm to oppose fascism. Bonhoeffer was eventually imprisoned and executed.

In his Letters from prison, he criticized established religion for creating and obeying a God who matched the characteristics of the Nazi leadership. Other churches who sought release from that oppressive regime created a different but also almighty God to rescue them, but did little themselves to aid in that rescue. Bonhoeffer believed that people must work together and with God to solve the massive problems at hand, and not to rely on an imagined savior from on high.

Agreeing with Bonhoeffer may be easier than saying precisely who the right God is and how we are or are not working with her. But God's presence is perhaps more apparent than we think.

In the first chapter of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, the first creation story is a tightly woven, highly structured, nearly mathematical picture of the universe.

Biblical scholars agree that this story was decades if not centuries in the making by a community of Priestly writers who were dedicated to getting it right — fine-tuning it — leaving no doubt as to how they imagined and understood the creation of the cosmos, and what it meant to them.

Using the Hebrew word Elohim for God's name, they write that in five days Elohim and the Spirit of Elohim create light then sky then water, earth, plants, sun, and animals with linear certainty and clarity. But on the sixth day the story takes a turn when it comes to creating us, the human.

Elohim turns to the Spirit of Elohim and says, "Let us make the human in our image, after our likeness."

To know what that image and likeness are, keep in mind that words in the ancient Hebrew language in which this story was written are usually gendered — masculine or feminine.

The proper name Elohim is a singular feminine noun with a masculine plural ending. The word for Spirit, as in the Spirit of Elohim, is feminine.

The human, therefore, is created in the image and after the likeness of a masculine/feminine Elohim and a feminine Spirit of Elohim. And the two synonyms — image being masculine, and likeness being feminine — reinforce this interplay of genders that we humans inherit.

If the mix of pronouns within these two verses — our, us, his, he, him, and them — seems beguiling or confusing, it's quite intentional. The Priestly writers never fool around. They are telling us who we are — and who we are is complex and complicated. Yes, there are two genders; and no, it's not that simple.

The story provides us not with a straightforward answer as to who we are, but with an opportunity to discover and create who we are.

It is our gift, our responsibility, to understand the interplay of those genders within ourselves, as we live our lives, among our friends and families, and within our different worlds. It's our privilege and honor to have been created in the image of a masculine/feminine God and to develop into the uniquely gendered person we are and want to become.

In light of this creation story, the assignment of a gender to us seconds after we're born is but human conceit. No one can know how genders will play themselves out in a newborn child as they develop into an adult. That should be welcomed as a joyous uncertainty, and the Priestly writers take out neither the joy nor the mystery of co-creating and discovering with God our own life.

The welcoming of each child into whatever they may become, the promise that we will help each child become what they are drawn to, our commitment to stand with them — that's divine intervention, that's letting there be light.

Are there other images of God that test, challenge, or confirm this image of God? Since this one image has the weight of coming first, it may serve as a beginning point from which to build a fuller and more practical interaction with other images of God in the Bible.

One of those images can be found in a collection of writings in the Old Testament known as the Wisdom Literature. Here we encounter the Psalms, Proverbs, and assorted poetry. One of the poems is the Song of Songs, a love story about a woman and a man, in which friend and lover are synonymous and interchangeable, there are no stereotyped gender roles, yearnings and desires are not kept secret, all parts of the body are celebrated, women and men speak as assertively or as coyly as the other. Neither is the boss. They are mutually each others' and their own.

There is no word for nor mention of God here. Many ask, Why is this small book even in the Bible?

The Jewish theologian, Martin Buber provided an answer in his treatise, I-and-Thou. When we first hear the term I-and-Thou, we usually assume that the I is me and the Thou is God.

But Buber would say the unnamed God in the poem is the relationship between the man and the woman, between oneself and another, when mutuality defines the relationship. God is the love, the mutual concern and caring, between them that creates the I and the Thou, me and another, as more and different than any other.

For Buber, the absence of mutuality, the absence of God from our relationships, renders them void of genuine meaning, and he calls this an I-and-It relationship, one in which we seek gain or advantage and treat the other as an object or resource to satisfy us.

In the I-Thou relationship we share a love and experience that no one else can understand completely. It has no goal to be achieved, it is simply and overwhelmingly the experience of love, and it protects us from whatever the world may direct at us. We have each other's back.

And so it gives us a certainty and strength that then allows and encourages us to be in the world. We can work with anyone about what matters most, because we have the certainty and protection of an ultimately loving personal relationship as our base, our anchor, our protection, our reason for being.

The verse we heard from the Song of Songs where the woman tells the daughters of Jerusalem that "The watchmen found me, beat me, as they went about the walls," lets us know that her and her partner's love for each other is undaunted by and effectively neutralizes thoughtless violence from outside the relationship.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's intimate I-and-Thou relationship with his small church, that I mentioned earlier, empowered them to work in the larger public sphere to oppose one of the most evil I-It relationships in human history. And today, on Pride Sunday, we grasp how dangerous that evil world was by remembering that 15,000 queer men were sent to the concentration camps, 65% of whom died there, and those who survived were re-incarcerated by the Allies who liberated the camps, some not released until the early 1970s.

As we move from our personal relationships into such a world, does the image of our God change and, if so, how?

One example from the New Testament portrays Jesus ministering to the people of Jerusalem, when some officials come to warn him that King Herod wants to kill him. And Jesus turns to the people of Jerusalem and says, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a mother hen gathers her brood under her wings."

His life is threatened, but he turns to protect the people, who have not been threatened. And he doesn't protect them with muscle, might, and offense, but with worry and gathering them into a soft, warm, comfortable embrace. With love. Jesus ignores and dismisses the king and his own safety and attends to us and our well-being.

This literary device of reversing what we might expect in a story to reveal a clearer and more complex image of who our God is also occurs within what is called the Prophetic literature in the Old Testament.

At one point the prophet Isaiah is exceedingly angry and screams with almost uncontrolled anger,

"Woe to those who make unjust decrees,
and to the writers who keep writing oppression into the laws,
to those who turn aside the needy from justice
and who rob the poor of their right,
who treat others as waste and prey upon the vulnerable."

One might expect Isaiah to lash out violently at them, but instead he writes a seemingly sentimental and imaginary poem about humans and animals living in peace and harmony. And yet, with those unforgettable words, "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb," he creates a message

so beautiful, deeply moving, and profoundly penetrating into our souls and bodies, that for over 2000 years it has inspired us and reminded us about the dream and direction in which we should steadily move.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us that part of being created in God's image is our "moral imagination" — our ability to see and make the good that is not yet, to see what needs to be done in spite of the apparent impossibility of its getting done.

Isaiah knew and saw the possibility when he gave to us God's words and blessing: "They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the sea."

So, let's round up these various images of God — from the Book of Genesis, a gender-fluid creator who gives us the gift of discovering and becoming ourselves; from the Song of Songs, the creative force of mutuality that gives meaning to our relationships and inspires our contribution to others; from the New Testament, a parent who worries about us and scurries to bring us into her warm protective embrace; and from the Prophets, a guardian of a our planet who tells us precisely and directly how to behave and to interact with each other on it. What do we do with this combined and entire image of our God?

James Baldwin said, "Our responsibility in this, our life, is to try to deal with each other and to work toward each other's freedom."

What we do is this, as the best of our ancestors has done: We re-commit to what we know is right; we don't wait to see what might happen, because it's already happening; we don't reduce or pull back on our connections with all forms of life, we increase and deepen them; and we take the kindest part of ourselves and expand it enormously.

We make America anew into that holy mountain of peace and love, where the knowledge of our God shall flow afresh like the waters that cover the sea, so that a small child, a trans child, can and shall lead us.

If we should go done in a ball of dust, or, conversely, if we prevail in turning the tide toward good, know that those we shall see along the way, those beside us and who shall lead us, inspire us, heroically nurture us will be trans people, because they will be the ones who didn't give up, who survived and can teach us how to get through any transition that we may need — to make mutuality the generating force on this our beloved planet.