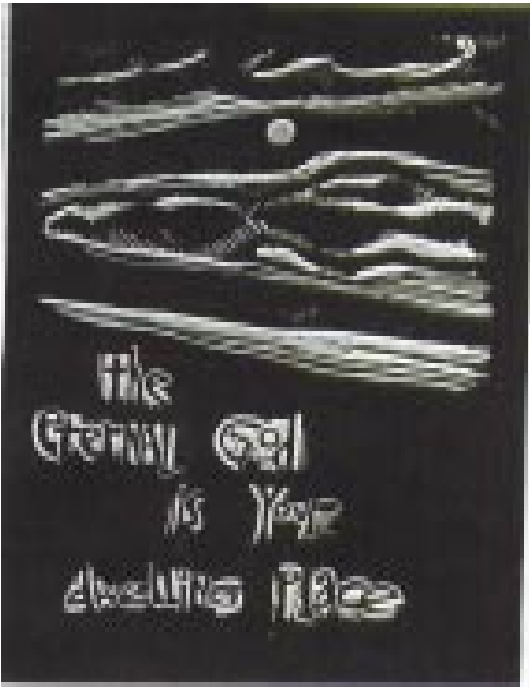


Expanding Our Language and Images for God



Your Dwelling Place

. . . Then how
can we name and praise God
in ways less idolatrous,
more freeing,
and more true
to the Triune God
and the direction of love
in the Anointed One, Jesus?

–Brian Wren

How do we think about who and what God is, what the spirit of God is like? Which words and images do we use to describe a God beyond language and pictures? How is the mystery and greatness of God conveyed in metaphors

that nourish and sustain us? And how do we describe our creator with words and images that include and embrace all people knowing that our language for God always will be limited, inadequate, and partial? Can we now welcome the opportunity and challenge to explore sacred speech so that we might “name and praise God in ways less idolatrous, more freeing, and more true to the Triune God...?”¹

Just as biblical texts and stories are reexamined and reinterpreted to speak to a new time and place, it’s important for us to reexamine and reconsider the language we use to “speak God” in our time and place. Very often, our words and metaphors for God are gender-based and patriarchal, monarchical terms reflective of empires

¹Wren, Brian, *What Language Shall I Borrow?* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 2.

and kingdoms. Because our thinking, our behavior, and our ways of knowing the Holy One are shaped by how we name and depict God, the words and images we use are critically important.



Living Water

Which words do you use to speak to God, to speak about God? Are they primarily male adjectives, monarchical nouns, words of habit? In the liturgy, in preaching and teaching, does your language and imagery for God cradle many meanings? Do you use words with and without gender, words of inclusivity and wholeness?

This collection invites you to consider the power of sacred language in our life together. It is meant as a beginning conversation about the many ways our words and images for God shape and inform Christian life. This invitation comes from a longing for language that includes and embraces the whole people of God, the whole body of Christ. It comes from a deep desire to expand our vocabulary to include more descriptive, even vivid imagery for God. And it comes from a community of colleagues in ministry, both women and men, who intentionally work to find more creative, expansive ways to describe the awesome mystery of God.

My hope is that you will use these resources as an opportunity for reflection and discussion in your own life and in the lives of your congregations. The resources shared here represent some of the most thoughtful and responsible thinking on a topic central to our life together as the body of Christ. Our language matters.

Julie K. Aageson
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Fire and Flame

**Eternal Spirit,
Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,
Source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all,
Loving God, in whom is heaven . . .**

–Night Prayer from the New Zealand Book of Common Prayer

BEGINNINGS

The invitation to consider our language and imagery for God can seem challenging, even threatening. The following resources represent a place to begin.



Mystery

A primary text and important beginning place for consideration of language for God is found in ***What Language Shall I Borrow? God Talk in Worship: A Male Response to Feminist Theology*** by Brian Wren (Crossroad). Poetic, graceful, imaginative and practical, it's a must read for clergy and for all who speak about God, for anyone interested in the issues of God-language. (B1045)

Gail Ramshaw's unique little book, ***A Metaphorical God*** (Liturgy Training Publications), is a feast of images and words. Never presuming to "name" or identify God in any one way, Ramshaw offers an abecedary of images old and new, familiar and fresh. Poetic and easily accessible, this book of meditations is an ideal resource conveying a multiplicity of images for God. It's also a helpful doorway into meaningful conversation about the words we use for God. (B1715)

Good Goats: Healing Our Image of God by Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, and Matthew Linn (Paulist Press) describes some ways God is pictured and understood. Readers are invited to reconsider images and language that are life-giving and expansive rather than judgmental or exclusive. This book is a gracious and transforming conversation about the importance of images. It includes a superb bibliography as well as questions for discussion. (B2854)

Tell Me Your Name: Images of God in the Bible by Arthur Zannoni (Liturgy Training Publications) wrestles thoughtfully with the mystery of God and how God is named. It's beautifully illustrated and written for the non-specialist. (B2867)

We need language that gives us a fuller picture of the God who birthed us. Then the world will be a softer, safer place and God a God big enough to be worthy of belief. –Joan Chittister

In *Heart Talks with Mother God* by Bridget Mary Meehan (Liturgical Press), our images of God are stretched and expanded. (B1599)

A collection of prayers that embodies meaningful imagery for God can be found in *Guerrillas of Grace* by Ted Loder (Innisfree Press). (B2337)

Among the finest introductions to making sense of sacred words and images is Gail Ramshaw's, *Under the Tree of Life* (Continuum). With poetic and luminous imagery, Ramshaw invites readers to join her under "the tree of life" as she works out her own confession. (B2304)

IN LITURGY and WORSHIP

If I am right about the power of language, God-talk in worship is of the utmost importance because it slants and shapes our conceptions of God from early childhood. –Brian Wren



Tree of Life

Each week in worship, names for God are repeated again and again. I often listen for the beautifully descriptive and inclusive words in the Eucharistic prayers and the prayers of the church. I hear there an expansive and more nourishing picture of God: servant, shepherd, bread of life, healer, living water, prophet, peacemaker, light of the world. I also listen for hymns that incorporate new images and meaningful metaphors. How do the words of our liturgy and our preaching reflect and reveal God?

"What does the liturgy intend by citing dozens of biblical images each Sunday?"² In *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary* (Fortress), Gail Ramshaw describes 40 images and the ways these pictures bind us together. (B2700)

²Gail Ramshaw, *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 5.

Mary Catherine Hilkert's *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (Continuum) addresses imagery by identifying and connecting preaching with sacramental images. (B2881)

God always outdistances our thoughts, words, knowledge, creeds, litanies, lives; outdistances them either because God is too simple for us to apprehend, or too complex for us to comprehend, or both. –Ted Loder



Principles for Worship (Augsburg Fortress), a study document from the ELCA's Renewing Worship resources, begins with "Language and the Christian Assembly." This important contribution addresses many aspects of language in worship providing an excellent opportunity for study and discussion. (PR728)

Volume 8 of **Open Questions in Worship: How Does the Liturgy Speak of God?** (Augsburg Fortress) by Gail Ramshaw, Catherine Ziel, and Walter Bouman offers three succinct essays about the language of our liturgy.

"What is the Proper Use of Language in Worship?" (ELCA) is a reproducible collection of thoughts on commonly asked questions from the Worship Q&A series.

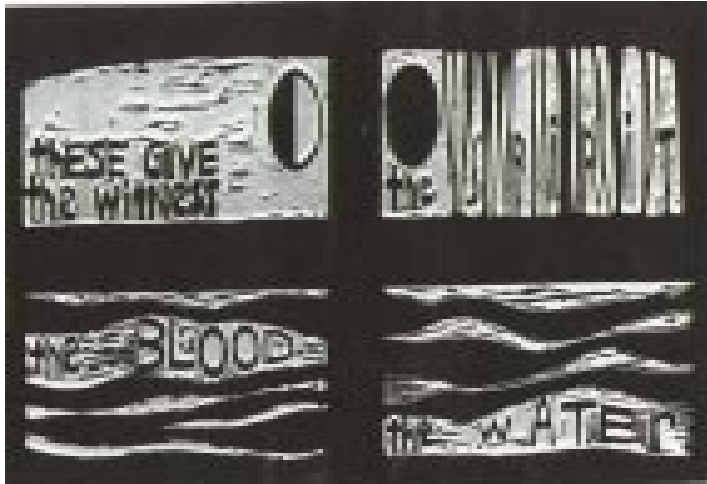
For texts that use inclusive and expansive language for God, go to www.quixote.org/pfe. A movement of women and men called **PRIESTS FOR EQUALITY** publishes *The Inclusive Psalms*, *The Inclusive New Testament*, and *the Inclusive Hebrew Scriptures*, resources that many find helpful.

FOR STUDY AND REFLECTION

I join with others in a monumental task of the next several centuries—describing God with many metaphors, images with and without gender, all partial pictures, only glimpses of the divine backside, each expression not the divinity itself but only the air moving when God breathes. –Gail Ramshaw

Presbyterian Nelle Morton's life and work in the 20th century was significant for opening conversation about our images of the divine. Her profoundly important work is contained in the book, *The Journey is Home* (PC/USA). A video and study guide of the same title depict some of her passion for rethinking our language and imagery. (B490)

Elizabeth Johnson's classic work, *She Who Is* (Crossroad), addresses ways of speaking about God from the perspective of women's dignity and equality. It's an incisive and important survey covering issues from the early church to the present. (B1298)



Spirit Leads

Christ in Sacred Speech: the Meaning of Liturgical Language (Fortress) and "second thoughts" on the same theme in *Reviving Sacred Speech* (Order of St. Luke) both by Gail Ramshaw are compelling, illuminating discussions of the language of liturgy, the words and images of worship. Both are stunning

in the ways they crack open images and metaphors for God. (B1159)

Joan Chittister has written a confession based on the creed, "kindling fire in its dry formulations, setting them ablaze with renewed meanings, making each phrase light the way to profound meditation..."³ *In Search of Belief* (Liguori) has much to do with our images and language for God and is highly recommended. (B2627)

An extraordinary collection of paintings chronicling an experience of God as Mother can be seen in *The Mother's Songs: Images of God the Mother* by Meinrad Craighead (Paulist Press). (B2892)

Words that Hurt, Words that Heal: Language About God and People (Graded Press—United Methodist Church) includes a User's Guide and a Leader's Guide for addressing the importance of inclusive language. This resource provides an opportunity for groups and individuals to explore issues of language for God. (PR795)

³Joan Chittister, *In Search of Belief* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori, 1999).

Concern for how we speak of God and name God is addressed in the ELCA Style Guidelines in the chapter, "Terms for God." This is found in the ELCA Publishing Standards Manual and is intended as the primary source of standards for all resources published by the ELCA.



Exploring the Feminine Face of God by Bridget Mary Meehan (Sheed and Ward) promotes healing for women who search for a sacred image of the Holy One reflecting a feminine perspective. (B1374)

Excellent Words: Inclusive Language in Liturgy and Scripture (Lutheran Episcopal Campus Ministry at MIT) documents different dimensions of the study of language offering helpful background for congregational study.

Additional resources include the following:

A Statement on Inclusive Language by Mary Wallum

The Name of God by Ann Hafften (from Holden Village's "Accent")

Yahweh's Gender: An Archaeological Perspective by Tom Lee (from "Entree")

Bibliographies

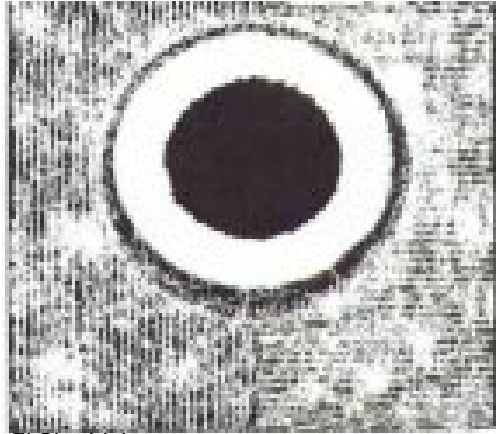
Christ, you are stem, stalk, tree!

Let your fruit take root in me. -Miriam Therese Winter

FOR VIEWING and LISTENING

An introduction to the work of Elizabeth Johnson in her book, ***She Who Is***, can be viewed in a video of the same title. This important book on the mystery of God and the language we use for God is reviewed in a clear and helpful way by the author. (VT1543)

Included Out (EcuFilm) is an animated film about the use of masculine language in much of Christian worship and terminology. With humor and brevity (2 minutes), it explores the moral and ethical implications and incongruities of sexual equality. A revealing and excellent discussion starter. (VT1016)



El Shaddai

An introduction to the life and work of Nelle Morton is found in **The Journey Is Home** (PC/USA), also the title of her book. An excellent leader's guide provides helpful analysis of the themes and topics. (VT517)

Brennan Manning discusses our images of God as they relate to belonging, believing, and becoming in the video, **Healing Our Image of God** (Seraphim). (VT1786)

Our Search for the Living God, an audiotape by Elizabeth Johnson, explores our struggle for language and imagery to describe God. (C203)

Christ the path and Christ the door.
Christ the bread and welcome cup.
Christ the word and cleansing bath.
Christ the robe and Christ the fire.
Christ the dawn and blazing sun.
Christ the light and Christ the star.
Christ the beginning and the end.
Christ our life and Christ our home.

—Samuel Torvend

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