Do Not Label

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

December 11, 2022 ~ Luke 1:46-55 ~ Matthew 11:2-11

I met with a parishioner this past week. “I don’t like the female gendering of God in our prayers,” she said. “I don’t like the male gendering of God either. Can’t we let God be genderless?” “And the prayers of the people that say, ‘we pray to the Lord’… or, ‘in Jesus’ name” makes it feel like we have to go ***through*** Jesus. Can I not pray to God? I want to pray to God. I ***do*** pray to God.”

Beneath any level of liturgical or semantic critique, I hear in these words the desire of one in the presence of the sacred who says, ‘do not box me in; do not label or define my experience of holiness.’ “I am who I am,” said the Holy One of Israel.

To pray is to enter, or at least seek to enter… open our hearts to enter… into the presence of God. Last Sunday, I marveled at our wondrous capacity to enter for a time into a holy landscape different from our daily life, to dwell for a time in a peaceable kingdom found within, where lion and lamb may graze together. This morning, I propose: the path of faith invites us into a liminal space, a threshold space that does not concede to labels, to simplistic definitions or binary divisions. I invite you to wonder with me: How do we nurture the capacity for paradox and ambiguity, how do we suspend our anxious need for resolution – to thereby allow for the freedom of God, the mystery of holiness in our lives?

Labels are useful, sometimes necessary. This faucet has hot water, or cold. Our brains naturally sort, differentiate between friend or foe. But labels used by some person may be soul-crushing for another person, or for a society. This person is male or female, straight or gay or trans. This one is brown or black or white. Of this political party and persuasion, or that one.

The parishioner who raised with me these redemptive questions about the nature of God and the intention of her prayers…; she is in very good company today with our scripture. I believe we are witness to the very same thing with Mary receiving word from an angel; then of John, sending his followers to inquire of Jesus. In these passages – these snapshots in time – the relationships are not yet set, the trajectory of the story not yet defined. Mary’s understanding of God, of God’s call upon her life, of the child she is to bear, and the path ahead.… Of these matters, Mary, we are told, is perplexed. Before she says yes and sings her song, she asks “How can this be?” A beautiful question. We know the story so our minds leap ahead and get it all wrapped up. (But) Let’s not do that; let’s stay here, if we can, in this space where unexpected announcement prompts questions of wonder – leaves everyone unsettled.

So also, with John. We imagine, if any person seemed sure of his mission in life, it is John – bug eating, animal-skin wearing zealot whose ardor and passion boil over as he takes on religious authorities, calls for radical repentance. Yet here, he sends word to ask, “***Are*** you the one? Are ***you*** the one?” Brooding captive, is John sure? Or unsure? Or both sure and unsure?

Notice what Jesus does and does not do. He does not answer simply. He could have said, “Yes. I am the one. Son of God. The Messiah sent to redeem the world.” That would be clear. Instead, Jesus ***describes***, “Tell John what you see: the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed….” Jesus does not define in a “now we’ve got that cleared up” sort of way. Jesus describes, reveals, illumines.

Jesus is consistent through his entire life and ministry, across all four Gospels. Jesus is consistent in providing not simple answers. With the Pharisees who try to trick him, or the disciples who seek clarity, Jesus reverses the questions, “who do you say that I am?” Pilate asks, are you the king of the Jews? And all he gets back is, “you say that I am.” Scholars have gone to ridiculous lengths to parse what they call the messianic secret of Mark’s Gospel wherein time and again Jesus instructs his followers to tell no one what they have seen and heard.”

Why? Maybe Jesus does not submit to labels or titles because they’re too small; Jesus knows that the path of labels and titles effectively narrows one’s vision. With labels we pigeon hole; we limit the possibility of surprise; we curtail the unexpected; we squash life itself, the essence of holiness.

Rachel Aviv is a journalist and writer for *The New Yorker*. In her extraordinary new book called Strangers to Ourselves Aviv follows the lives of several people each of whom receives a life-altering diagnosis. She comes to the task honestly, having herself been diagnosed with anorexia at age six.

One story is about Bapu, a woman in south India who sees herself and is seen by some as a mystic whose writings reflect a lineage of ancient Vedic wisdom; she is seen by others as stricken with mental illness. Aviv writes, Bapu “understood her devotion through a story that was celebrated by fellow worshippers and by the [sacred] literature she read, and, when it was forcibly replaced by a new one about mental illness, she felt diminished. The new explanation felt like an affront…. Psychiatry isn’t the only framework that has a kind of double-edged quality, offering a story that can save a person but that also, under different conditions, feels lonely and intractable.” And here’s the nub; Aviv writes: “I wonder about the character of Bapu’s distress before it was classified as either mysticism or mental illness, just as I question whatever basic feelings existed in me before they were called anorexia. In each case, the original experience couldn’t be captured or understood on its own terms and gradually became something that wasn’t entirely of our own making.” (end quote)

What is the character of the thing before it is classified with language? And how does the act of classifying turn the person into someone or something they are not, we are not? Who is Mary, and what is the quality of her relationship with God in this moment of divine annunciation – before the rest of us got a hold of it? Who is John? Who is Jesus? Who am I in the sight of God? Who is God in my sight, in my life today? Who am I as I wonder about how to be in. a relationship with a friend, or as I face a life altering choice? Who am I if I wonder about sexuality or gender or identity in all its multi-variant forms? Holiness is a place or a moment in time where we are not defined by other’s descriptions. Holiness is a place where we are not defined by others at all. Holiness is a place where we may be seen, or revealed, or illumined, and loved. As we are, without any definition at all.

Returning to my conversation with the parishioner, the Rev. Debie Thomas has written of Mary being “much perplexed,” asking, “How can this be?”

“Like Mary,” she writes, “I was raised with a fairly precise and comprehensive picture of who God is and how God operates in the world. If anyone had asked me to describe God when I was fifteen, twenty, or thirty years old, I would have rattled off a list of divine attributes as readily as a kindergartner recites the alphabet: “God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. God is Three and God is One. God is holy, perfect, loving, righteous, merciful, just, and sovereign.”. . .

“What an interesting shock reality has been. Who knew that my life with God would actually be one long goodbye? That to know God is to *unknow*God?  To shed my neat conceptions of the divine like so many old snakeskins and emerge into the world bare, vulnerable, and new, again and again?

“This, of course, is what Mary has to do in the aftermath of Gabriel’s announcement. She has to consent to evolve. To wonder. To stretch. She has to learn that faith and doubt are not opposites—that beyond all the easy platitudes and pieties of religion, we serve a God who dwells in mystery. If we agree to embark on a journey with this God, we will face periods of bewilderment.” (end quote)

So, how do we create and hold a space that does not concede to simplistic binary. How do we nurture the capacity for paradox and ambiguity? How do we practice unknowing? With our emphasis on the Via Media – a middle way between unresolved differences – this would seem to be a particular charism of the Anglican Communion and Episcopal Church. But it’s easier said than done.

So we pray. Let’s do that. Let us pray:

Holy God, nameless one, holy mystery: open us to your presence, to your love. You knew us before we were knit together in our mother’s womb; you love us as stars in the night sky. Walk with us this day in wonder, tenderness, and joy. In your holy nameless name, we pray. Amen.