

“In Praise of the Goddess”
Sermon by Sharon Wylie
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I want to share with you this morning some of my thoughts on God. Yes, Unitarian Universalists, brace yourselves! I’m going to talk about God from the pulpit this morning! I want to share with you some of my experience and some of my reflections about the nature of God.

I was raised in a family that was Protestant Christian pretty much in name only. We went to church once a year on Easter to my grandmother’s Methodist church. At Christmas, we put out a little nativity scene in the living room, but mostly Christmas was about Santa Claus and the presents I was going to get. Religion was far in the background to the more important work of daily life. My parents were primarily concerned with making a living, and I was mostly concerned with doing well in school. Life was about having goals, getting ahead, and doing well.

Still, I had questions. Attending church once a year did not provide me with a solid understanding of the complex theologies of Christianity, and it was easy for an intelligent teenager to find fault with a belief system when there was no one—in my life anyway—to defend that belief system. I didn’t understand why God’s primary purpose would be to judge me. It was hard for me to imagine that God could be too interested, really, in the things I was doing every day. One of the ten commandments reads “Thou shall not take the name of the Lord in vain.” I was pretty sure I was breaking that commandment every day, every time I said

anything like, “oh God, do I really have to make my own dinner” or “oh God, I didn’t get my homework done!” If that was all you had to do to go to hell, then I must be going, even though I’d never done anything REALLY wrong, like kill someone. How could these things be equally bad?

And the information that “believing in Jesus” would save me did NOT clear things up for me. Wasn’t I a child of God just like Jesus was a child of God? How was Jesus any different from me? And if I understood this system of belief correctly, it seemed I could KILL someone, but as long as I believed in Jesus, then it would be okay. That didn’t make any sense to me. If this were actually God’s system of justice, it seemed really random and unfair.

And God never seemed random or unfair to me. PEOPLE seemed random and unfair, LIFE seemed random and unfair, but not God. I’ve always believed that there is a God, and that belief has never been in doubt. I know there are people in this room who believe differently, and I respect that. You could be right, for all I know. I’m not here to say I know something that nobody else knows, and I’m not here to convince you to see things the way that I do. All I’m saying is that it is my experience that God exists. The beauty of this world and the gifts of life and love feel like the work of the divine to me.

So when I was around 17 years old, I was laying in bed one night, unable to fall asleep, pondering this question of God. It finally occurred to me that maybe God was NOTHING like what I had been told. Maybe God was not an old white man who sits in the sky judging everyone on Earth. Maybe, instead, maybe God

loves us just as we are. Maybe God is down here, part of the Earth, right by our side every day. And maybe God is...female.

This idea seemed astounding to me. I had read about Goddesses before, of course. I had a book of Greek myths. But the Gods and Goddesses of those stories were just people, it seemed, people with petty grievances and jealousies. I had never thought before that the God who created all existence—the God who created ME—could be a Goddess.

Laying in bed that night, staring at the ceiling, having had this astounding idea, I let myself imagine that female God. I imagined her in the room with me, like moonlight all around. She must be everywhere, all the time, I thought, always with me, always around me. She wouldn't have a body, I thought; she would be more like the air that I breathe. She was embracing me, always, whether I knew it or not. Though I had never known her before, I suddenly seemed to know her quite well.

This simple visualization effected me profoundly. My body relaxed. I felt content. I felt peace. I felt relieved. It felt good to be loved by God.

At the time, I thought this idea of God was uniquely mine. If people asked me what religion I was, I no longer said I was Christian and just said I practiced my own religion, something that I had made up myself. It wasn't until the summer after my first year of college that I read a book about Paganism and discovered that the beliefs I had thought were so uniquely mine were, in fact, Earth-centered beliefs that had existed for millennia.

For the next 12 years, I was an active and practicing but SOLITARY Pagan. My partner was supportive of my beliefs, but having been raised as a Catholic, he was on his own journey of spiritual reflection and discovery. I sometimes attended public rituals for the Pagan holidays, celebrating the agricultural year. And I even found a couple of groups of Pagans, groups that I could have joined and studied with. But just like any religion, Paganism has its orthodoxy, and each group I found was certain that it knew the RIGHT way of doing things. The RIGHT way to cast the circle, the RIGHT way to invoke the Goddess. This seemed to me just as divisive and dangerous as any religion that claims to know the RIGHT way of believing and practicing. So I never joined.

In 2004, my partner and I found our local Unitarian Universalist church and immediately recognized there a place that could provide a spiritual home for both of us. When I joined, I was proud and grateful to have found a religious community that accepted my belief system as one of many, just as welcome and valid as any other.

The idea that God could be female is not unique to Paganism, of course. Almost all of the world's major religions—including liberal Christianity—have an understanding of God as male AND female, male OR female, or without gender. Theologians today are careful NOT to refer to God using gendered pronouns. The preference instead is to simply use the word “God” repeatedly. “God loves God’s children.”

Why is this important? Why is it important even for atheists to care about the nature of God? The nature of what people LABEL as God?

Think of how it feels when you know that someone you love, someone whose opinion matters to you greatly, think of how it feels when that person is angry with you. When even though you have tried your very best, you have disappointed that person again. That is how I had felt believing in the God of the Christian bible. Always wrong, always floundering, never quite good enough. Even for those of us who have rejected the idea of this kind of God, it pervades our culture. We live in a culture that encourages us to try—constantly, incessantly, unrelentingly—to try to be the BEST. To be the best we can be, the most successful, the smartest, the wealthiest. For those of us who are of a progressive mindset, we strive to be the most thoughtful, the most educated, the most ecologically aware, the most politically active. Whether we are always aware of it or not, we are many of us constantly competing with each other.

This cultural competition has evolved from a variety of pressures being applied, but at its heart, I believe, is the ancient notion that our wealth and success and intelligence is a sign of God's favor. It is a sign that the angry and judging God in the sky has seen our goodness and rewarded us with material success. I expect that NOBODY in this room thinks that consciously. I'm not suggesting that. But I AM suggesting that this idea of COMPETITION has pervaded western culture for centuries, and we are still living with it. It is in almost every aspect of what we do.

Now think of how it feels when you know that you are loved unconditionally, that even when you have done your very WORST, you are held in the embrace of one who still finds you beautiful and worthy and capable of all that is good. Maybe some of us have never felt this love. It is transforming to be loved liked this. It is a relief. What if we didn't have to keep trying so hard to be the BEST all the time? What if we are okay just as we are? AND...what if everyone we know is okay just as THEY are?

There is no inherent reason that we should envision a male God as judgmental and disapproving, but I think most of us recognize that this image comes from Christianity. Jesus himself is understood as loving and generous, but I think many of us can't reconcile the idea of a loving God with ideas of hell and damnation, nor with the idea that God required the murder of God's son to redeem humanity. And historically, this God has been described as male.

Conversely, there is no inherent reason that we should envision a female God as loving and nurturing. Men can be loving and nurturing. Women can be judgmental and disapproving. You should know that CARING whether God is male or female is terribly old-fashioned. Modern understandings of gender are NOT based on simplistic male/female stereotypes.

But given where we are now, living in a culture that is still dominated by patriarchal and fundamentalist Christian ideas that God is male, those of us who worship the divine feminine envision her as the healing antidote to the poisons that endanger our world. In contrast to the idea that the Earth is ours to dominate and

subdue, we envision the Goddess as the Earth herself, in need of our love and reverence. In contrast to the idea that God is angry and judging, we envision the Goddess as loving and forgiving. In contrast to the idea that God is separate from us—far away, up in the sky—we envision the Goddess as intimately close, here in the room with us now.

I am suggesting that to articulate an understanding of God as female is an act of resistance. It is an act of resistance in a culture that values wealth above people. It is an act of resistance in a culture that values the procurement of oil above the health of our oceans. It is an act of resistance in a culture where women make 77 cents to every dollar that men earn, where rape occurs every 6 minutes, and where occupations like teaching, nursing, and homemaking—life affirming occupations typically associated with women—are undervalued and underpaid. It is an act of resistance in a culture where men are discouraged from naming their fears and vulnerabilities, socialized to show no emotion other than anger, and disparaged for valuing parenthood and relationships over materialism and achievement.

I am suggesting that when we let ourselves know and experience the Goddess, we invite balance into a world dangerously focused on consumerism, achievement at all costs, and the objectification and degradation of our physical bodies, male, female, and everything in between and beyond. When we honor the Goddess, we honor that which our culture consistently devalues: beauty, love, partnership, family, the environment. We help bring balance to a world, and to our lives, desperately in need of it.

It is part of Goddess worship to recognize her in the waxing and waning of the moon. The Goddess is said to be Triple: the maiden, the mother, and the crone. She reveals herself to us in each of these guises, and more. The waxing moon corresponds to the Goddess in her maiden aspect, that time of life when we are young and growing, playful and whimsical. The full moon corresponds to the Goddess in her mother aspect, that time of life when we are adults, at the fullness of our powers and potential. The waning moon corresponds to the Goddess in her crone aspect, that time of life when we are physically not as strong as we once were, but we savor the wisdom we have gained from a life well lived. These are the three visible aspects of the Goddess, and we can see this cycle—wax, blossom, and wane—in the cycle of the day, the month, and the seasons of the year. Spring, summer, and fall. Wax, blossom, and wane.

But there is a fourth aspect of the Goddess. The new moon. The time she is no longer visible to us, but we know she is still present, for she is never gone. In Neopagan traditions, this is our understanding of deep winter, when Earth's transforming energy is no longer visible, but still—believed by us on the basis of millennia of experience—still believed to exist. This is our understanding of the moon cycles, when the moon is no longer visible but still—believed by us on the basis of millennia of experience—still believed to exist. This is our understanding of death, when a life is no longer visible, but still—believed by us on the basis of millennia of experience—still believed to exist.

Tonight is the new moon. It is a time of transformation, of letting go, a time of faith that renewal is on the way. I hope you will go outside tonight, and look up at the darkness of the sky. Perhaps you have not recognized the Goddess in your life for some time. As you look into the inky darkness of the night sky, I invite you to have faith that she IS here. Feel the cool air against your cheek and know it is her kiss. Smell the moist loam of the earth in the darkness and know it is her body. Hear the soft chirp of the crickets and know they are her messengers.

This is God, children. Listen up well.

Blessed be.