

Sharon A. Benton  
UCC

April 24, 2005

Plymouth Congregational

Metaphor Be With You  
Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16 and 1 Peter 2:2-10

Jesus is the rock...and he rolls my blues away. Bop shoo bop, a-bop shoo bop. Jesus is the rock...and he rolls my blues away. Bop shoo bop, a-bop shoo bop. (Singing) Jesus is the rock...and he rolls my blues away.

So not all camp songs are theologically astute.

I like rocks. A lot. They're solid, and earthy. They can be worn smooth like stones in a river, or rough enough to cut like shards of glass. You can pile them up to create a shelter, or you can string them together and wear them on a chain.

I keep stones in my office and home at all times, and my favorite spot in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania is Devil's Den, where the boulders are massive and you can climb around and through them. Maybe the call of the Rock is the true source that drew me to these Rocky Mountains.

I just like rocks.

So you see, I understand the Psalmist's prayer: "Be a rock of refuge for me... You are indeed my rock and my fortress." As I shared in my April Placard article, at the summer camp I attended as a kid, there was a rock in the middle of a stream that I claimed as *my* rock. I would make a beeline for that rock when I felt alone or angry or otherwise upset about some childhood grief. I would also head there when I was joyful or at peace and wanting to share it with my Creator. That rock was indeed a refuge, and for me a strong connection to God. God is my rock and my refuge.

Christ, also, is like a stone; but 1<sup>st</sup> Peter uses this stone differently than does the Psalmist. Christ is, in fact, the *cornerstone*: a particular stone on which a building rests and from which it takes its design. Christ is, according to 1<sup>st</sup> Peter, the foundation on which to build one's life.

Happily for those of us who have ever touched a stone, the author of this letter also lets us know that Christ is not the typical stone that most of us have experienced. Still solid and strong, but also a *living* stone: not static or staid, but alive; not barren or cold, but life-giving...much more like the *milk* he'd mentioned just prior.

"Like newborn infants, /long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation – if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good."

So...now...Jesus is milk? Yes, apparently. The milk that believers drink is not only the gift but also the giver; what tastes good is Christ's own self ("if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good"). It makes me think of communion. Jesus, the milk, is good-tasting and life-giving. After reading this passage I realize that it really wasn't such a big leap to what I always considered the ridiculous marketing of "Got Jesus?" in response to the "Got Milk?" ad campaign.

Now, while the metaphor of Jesus or God as rock works for me, I must admit that comparing Jesus to milk...well, it just seems soggy. Maybe it works for you – it probably worked for Peter's

audience, so I'm in no position to reject the comparison. For an infant, milk is sustenance, just as Christ is sustenance for the Christian. It works. But not for me.

It's not that we see different things – we all see milk – it's just that we see the same things differently. And as we try to tell our school children, different isn't bad, it's just different.

The letter of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter offers an example of viewing things differently.

He begins from the premise that ALL people can see Jesus, the rock. But some of those people look at the rock and see a cornerstone: a great, solid stone on which to build their house's foundation. Others look at the rock...and toss it aside as unnecessary to the construction: it's just another stone. And some, oops, stub their big toe on it, thinking it's just a balled up plastic bag left too long in the dirt. We're all looking at the same rock, but each of us views it differently ... and we view it from our own experiences and realities. If we have an experience of faith in Jesus, we see a cornerstone. Others can see Jesus but not experience him as the Messiah, so the rock is just a rock.

But then, this rock image may not work for everyone. That's why we have so many metaphors describing God. My image of God as a rock probably wouldn't work for, say, the martyr Stephen. His story in the Acts of the Apostles was another "rocky" reading the Lectionary offered for today. Stephen's part in the Bible is short, and it ends with him being stoned to death. So a rock *may not* be his preferred image for God.

How about water, then? I also connect with God as water. The Divine flows throughout the whole earth, encompassing all. God is living water, moving below the surface, in streambeds and through our very bodies. Sometimes the Holy One offers me the peace of the ebbing tide, and I can look out at the endless expanse of ocean's water and know that God is as wide as that. Always I have a sense of awe before the ocean's power. It's a comforting image, for me. But if I were to bring that same image I love so much to lands recovering from a tsunami's devastation, my God may be feared, perhaps even hated.

How powerful is imagery! How important is metaphor! How necessary it is to know it is not absolute!

Our images for God can only take us so far – Jesus wasn't a stone nor is God a rock. Words only offer a tiny knowledge of who and what God is.

In the Foreword of our hymnal, Thomas Dipko makes this statement:

In the metaphor of centuries of hymnody, ancient and modern, we discern that God is always more than our human words are able to express. Our reverence for the mystery of God's being invites humility as we seek language that opens human hearts to the good news of God's love for all creation. We acknowledge the limitations of our words while we confess that in Jesus Christ the Word of God became flesh and lived within history.

So if we know all of this, that our language is limited and that the Divine is more than we can describe or know, why do I repeat what has already been said and is even printed right in front of us?

Perhaps for the same reason we read the same scriptures over and over. Because reminding is good. Because we always find something new and because we remember certain stories and not others. We get stuck. We use the same words and stories over and over, and finally they become all that we know of God.

Consider one of the most popular images for God as an example – an old one, but one we still understand: Father.

It was Jesus' own way of addressing his Creator. It was also an image that drew on a familiar figure for all. *Everyone* knows what a father is, just as everyone knows what a rock is.

When Jesus said "Father, Abba" his hearers knew what he was talking about. We still do. But just like the stone, we all may see the same thing – a father – but we all see it differently. We place on the image our own experiences of father, our own emotional attachments.

For many the image of God as Father remains a comforting, strong metaphor for who God is in their lives.

But as the church has finally come to acknowledge, some people experience God the Father as being too narrow an image, and they need more in God than just the attributes of a father.

Not that the metaphor is WRONG – because it still conveys some very real characteristics of the Holy One – but that it's still only a very small part of the whole that is the Great Mystery.

So maybe we supplement with the image of Mother, another biblically supported image. In Luke God desires to shelter her people under her wing like a mother hen (Luke 13:34-35).

As Lady Wisdom God prepares a table of good things to eat and invites all to partake of her offering (Proverbs 9:1-6).

Jesus compares God to a woman sweeping, seeking one lost coin as important as all the others (Luke 15:8).

And according to Moses, God both conceived and gave birth to her people Israel (Numbers 11:10-15).

It may come as a surprise to those Christians so opposed to the image of Mother God, but even with modern science, only *mothers* conceive and give birth. It's just a metaphor. It's all metaphor.

And yet, many of us still respond to speaking of God the Mother with discomfort. WHY?

Questioning our responses to uncomfortable descriptions of God is a key to truly encountering the fullness of the Divine.

If we get stuck on some imagery and not others, why not look within to discover what belief we hold about our God that disallows us from seeing her other aspects.

What keeps me from embracing milk, for example, as a good metaphor for Jesus? *Well, it seems silly* – but WHY? After all, milk *is* life-giving. Infants wouldn't survive without such nourishment. It makes a good metaphor!

Is it that milk is so mundane? No, because fathers are rather commonplace, too.

Is it because there is no inherent "life" in it? No, because I could argue that rocks are even more lifeless.

Is it because I haven't encountered this particular image before, because it's unfamiliar and not handed down in most Christian circles? Because I didn't grow up hearing of "the Milk" like I did

“the Rock”, “the Shepherd”, “the Vine”, “the Lord”, “the Light” and so on? ... There is something to that for me. New ideas often generate discomfort – even if the “new” idea is as old as our Bible.

This week I had already been reflecting on the many ways we name God, when I caught a glimpse of a bumper sticker I’d never seen before.

It read: “Metaphor Be With You.”

Have any of you seen this? Metaphor be with you.

It was a first for me, and at first I just couldn’t wrap my mind around it. There are only a few phrases I associate with “Be with you.”

“May the Force be with You.” Okay, so that wasn’t the first that came to mind, but it popped up whenever I tried an internet search for the bumper sticker.

The others I think of are “Peace be with you”, and, “God be with you.”

*GOD be with you. Metaphor be with you.*

I finally realized that, without exception, all the words we have for God are metaphors. Even the word God is generic, no name at all.

God be with you.

The Lord be with you.

The Rock be with you.

The ever-flowing water of life be with you.

It’s all metaphor.

The closest our scriptures ever come to naming the unnamable is in the book of Exodus when Moses questions who he should say has sent him:

I AM. I AM.

Not Father. Not Mother. Not Lord. Not Rock.

Just being. Presence. Existence. *I AM.*

God does not choose to name Godself in human terms.

God leaves that to us,

as we get to know him,

as we learn more about her,

as we find new ways of loving the Existing One.

What a wonderful gift. God has given us such power in naming God, for ourselves and others.

This week I challenge all of us to find new ways of imaging God – and to use them in prayer and conversation. God is all things, and no thing we can know.

May the Rock, the Shepherd, the Womb, the Light, the Living, the One, be with all of us now and always. Amen.