

Sermon: May 8, 2022 “Like a Mother”

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Scripture: Isaiah 66:12-13; John 10:22-30

I must confess something to you all today: I didn't want to preach today. I mean, I love to preach. But I really, really didn't want to preach today. In part, that's because, like many ministers, I feel like don't know *the right way* to preach today. I've been a minister for many years now and led many services on Mother's Day, yet I've never preached a sermon about mothers on Mothers' Day. I have nothing against mothers, of course. I am one and have a wonderful one. The reason I don't usually preach a mother-related sermon on Mother's Day is because it can be a very difficult day for folks. It's hard for those who have lost their mother or who will never be a mother in the way they hoped. It's painful for people who have a strained relationship or no relationship with their mother. It can be heartbreaking for those who have lost children or are having a hard time conceiving. For these reasons and more, Mother's Day is difficult for a preacher to navigate as we try to build a bridge across the chasm between those who wish to celebrate and those who would rather not think about it at all.

So as I thought about how I might preach *this* mother's day and mulled over the scriptures, I was reminded of our Easter service and my reading from the inclusive Bible. In that reading, God was referred to a Mother-Father. When I read that, looking out into the pews, I saw some eyes get as big as saucers. Uh-oh. Sometimes, people's eyes get big when I say something and I think, good, I'm making them think. But on Easter, the first thing that came to me was: well, clearly we need to talk about how we understand God throughout scripture. We need to talk about this because so many of us refer to God as a “father,” often forgetting that a Creator God

as vast and mysterious and loving and good as ours is so much more than an old white-haired, bearded guy sitting on a throne in the clouds. Now, let me be clear, I have nothing against old, white-haired, bearded guys, but except for one mention in a dream, God is never described that way—not the Christian God, anyway. That conception of God probably comes from Zeus, the “father-like” god of Greek Mythology (as, in fact, do so many of our imaginings about the spiritual world).

If God isn't an old, white-haired, bearded man on a throne in the clouds, what does God look like? Well, no one knows, but because of the nature of the cultural structures in the time of the Biblical stories, we imagine God as almost exclusively male. Since Jesus calls God father, we have gotten this idea that God can only be father. Of all the ways we talk about God in culture and even in the church, one conception of God we don't pay much attention or lip-service to is the ways in which God mothers us.

Some of you may bristle at this, but hear me out. Now, I know that if you type, “God as mother” into Google, you will first find links that tell you that seeing God as mother is “unbiblical.” You can scroll down and you'll find that for many keyboard jockeys, God as mother is a problematic, if not heretical way to talk about God.

Well, to that, I would say two things:

- 1) for the love of all that is good and holy, do *not* center your biblical study around what you find on *Google*. I hope I'm not the first person to tell you that not everything you read on the internet is true.

2) I hate to break it to these keyboard warriors posting to websites, but speaking of God solely as father and giving to God no sort of feminine quality is what's actually unbiblical.

That is because all throughout scripture, in addition to the ways in which God is referenced as Father, God is referred to with feminine attributes. We find this vision very clearly laid out in the Hebrew Bible (or what is sometimes called the Old Testament) as well as in the New Testament. The very first story told in scripture contradicts this idea that God cannot be anything but Father in two ways. First, God created humankind in the image of God—not just male, but female also. If we are created in the image of God, but God is only male, then we have to ask some big questions about the truthfulness of the first creation story. Because if we are made in the likeness of God, then God can't be viewed as solely male.

Second, when the Holy Trinity decides to create humankind in their image, God says, "Let *us* create *humankind* in *our* image, after *our* likeness..." Us and our. This scripture as well as so many of the complex imaginings of God throughout our holy books, in part, invites us to envision God as far more than simply an old white-haired, bearded man sitting in a throne in the clouds who is somehow magicking things into existence. This scripture (as well as others) invites us to imagine God as a relational being. As a "them" rather than an "it."

But it doesn't end there. In Deuteronomy 32 we get more explicit examples of God envisioned as more than male, and, in this case: female. In verse 11, God is likened to a mother eagle who spreads her wings to catch you and carries you with her. As I think about all the birds nests springing up all

across the Northeast and beyond this spring, I imagine that mother bird taking and catching her young as they find their own way in the world. This way of envisioning God seems very appropriate to me. And, it's biblical.

Later, in verse 32:18, God is described as having given birth. In our general understanding, by and large, it is women who give birth. It is, in most cases, *mothers* who give birth. God, the creator, gave birth to all that surrounds us. I'm not going to get into the complexities of chromosomal analysis, sex, and gender identification (except to say that God loves all of God's children irrespective of how they do or do not identify), but in the simplest possible reading of these scriptures, a God who gives birth gives us a way of understanding God as having *some* feminine characteristics.

As we venture into Isaiah, the story is virtually replete with images of God as mother: soothing as a mother soothes (66:13), as we read today. The scripture reads that God will comfort us not as a father, but as a *mother* comforts her child. Having comforted as a mother and been comforted by my own mother, I know that's a specific kind of comfort.

Prior to that, in chapter 49, we read about God as a mother who nurses and who shows compassion for her child (49:15). God is a mother who nourishes us and helps us grow in only the ways mothers can. And then if we go back just a little bit further, we see again that God is imagined as one who cries out as a woman cries out in labor (42:14)—this is God crying out in pain for God's creation in the ways that a mother cries out as she gives birth to her creation.

And if that's not enough, let's go forward some more to Hosea. In Hosea, God is as protective as a mother bear (13:8). As a mother of a child recently bullied in school, God as a protective mother bear is a *very* relatable God. And anyone who's ever encountered a mother bear can attest to her fierce love and protection of her children. Suffice to say if you find yourself anywhere near a mother bear and her cubs, you slowly, but surely, get away from there. But in these and so many ways, God is presented to us as more than male.

Now I ask you, is Isaiah a heretic? Is Hosea? Were the writers of Genesis and Deuteronomy mistaken? Misguided? Are they unbiblical? What about if we go back to the Psalms? In Psalm 131 verse 2, we read of a God who calms our soul as a weaned child is calmed by her mother. But if all that isn't enough to get you to at least consider expanding your vision of God beyond the old, white-haired, bearded man in the clouds, then let us consider Jesus. Yes, even Jesus, who constantly calls God "Father," refers to God in mothering terms. In Matthew (23:37) and in Luke (13:34), Jesus, frustrated (an understatement, really) with the religious authorities of Jerusalem and how their leadership has led the people to treat those sent by God, exasperated with the ways in which supposedly holy people are abusing God's holy call to ministry, looks at them and talks about how he is *like a mother hen* who wishes to gather all people under her wings.

I don't know many men who want to be referred to as women or as mothers, and yet God is not averse to this idea throughout scripture. Not even God in Jesus—the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, the one who shows us The Way, the one part of the godhead we never need doubt was male—not even Jesus leaves out a comparison which imagines with him

some feminine qualities, some mothering qualities. In the holiest books known to Christians and Jews alike, we are not only invited, but explicitly given examples of how to think of God not just as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but also—but *also*—as Creator and as mother.

Jesus said in John 10, as people denied his claims and dismissed his message, that his people would listen to him and follow him as a sheep follows her shepherd. And you want to know something we don't often think about as we imagine a shepherd: Rachel was a shepherd—Rachel a woman, a mother, was a shepherd. In Genesis 29 verse 9, Jacob is encountered by a woman walking with her father's sheep, the text reads, "for she was a shepherdess." A woman, a shepherd, just like Jesus calls himself.

In all those scriptures and even here as we think about shepherds, we're getting images that move us beyond an exclusively male understanding of God. There are plenty of ways to say the things these scriptures say, so I have to believe that it is no mistake, no mere coincidence, no passing attempt at poetic license, that brings these particular references to our attention. We're fond of talking about how all scripture is there for us to learn from, so I have to think we're meant to take something from these.

If seeing God solely as Father was how we are meant to see God, then God could have appeared to God's people solely that way, but that's simply not the way God works. That's not the only image we're given. That's not the only story we are told, my friends. As a responsible preacher of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I cannot stand here in good conscience only calling God "father" when we have ample evidence God is far, far more complex

than that. As a woman who preaches, as a mother who teaches, and as a daughter with strong female examples throughout my life, understanding this about God, in whose image ALL OF US are made, makes the idea of preaching on Mother's Day seem a little less scary and a whole lot more divinely inspired. God as Mother is every bit as acceptable as God as Father. Our God is an awesome God because our God has showed us in this and in so many other ways just how vast and loving God is. If you don't want to see God as Mother, that's okay. But I hope that, at the minimum, we can all leave this room with the joyful knowledge that our still-speaking God, creator and protector, is so much bigger and more loving than the church fathers have let us imagine. And that, my friends, is Good News. Amen.