

The Motherhood of God
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Farmville Baptist Church
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Two weeks ago, on Good Shepherd Sunday, we talked about biblical images that liken Jesus to a shepherd. Since today is Mother's Day, it seemed appropriate to look at biblical images that liken God to a mother. Of course we know that God is neither male nor female, and there are images throughout Scripture of God as a heavenly parent. Our reading from I John just a moment ago reminds us that when we believe in Jesus we are born of God, and that everyone who loves the parent (God) loves the child (all of humanity). We often appropriately think of God as Father ó Jesus did óbut it is just as appropriate to think of God as Mother, as we'll see in a minute, Jesus did that too.

Why is it important to think of God as both mother and father? First of all, because those images are found in Scripture. Another good reason is that for a lot of folks, the image of God as Father is problematic. I had a great relationship with my dad; he was warm and loving, so for me, the image of God as Father is warm and loving too. It took me a bit too long to learn that this was not always the case for others. In the very first church I served as a youth minister, there were 15-20 youth who attended with some regularity. 75-80% of those students were being raised by single mothers. For them, father was often the person who was absentee at best and who had abandoned or abused them at worst. The image of God as father was not a helpful or inspiring one for them. I, along with the other youth leaders, had to work on intentionally to identify healthier images of God for most of those kids.

I'll be the first to acknowledge that some people struggle with the image of God as Mother ó we talked earlier in the service about how Mother's Day is a difficult day for many

people for a variety of reasons. But just as Scripture offers us a variety of wonderful images of God as Father, it offers images of God as Mother that can bring us great comfort in the challenging world we're living in these days.

We find the first image of God as both father and mother in Genesis 1 ó right at the very beginning. You've heard the words often, *So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:27)* Both men and women are reflections of God!

In Isaiah 66:6-10, the prophet uses the imagery of labor, delivery, and nursing to speak of God's work in vindicating Zion. Hear part of that passage now :*Listen, an uproar from the city! A voice from the temple! The voice of the Lord, dealing retribution to his enemies! Before she was in labor she gave birth; before her pain came upon her she delivered a son. Who has heard of such a thing? Who has seen such things? Shall a land be born in one day? Shall a nation be delivered in one moment? Yet as soon as Zion was in labor she delivered her children. Shall I open the womb and not deliver? says the Lord; shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb? says your God. Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her— that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom. For thus says the Lord: I will extend prosperity to her like a river, and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.*

Isaiah paints God as a human mother more than any of the other prophets. In Isaiah 49 the prophet writes, *“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the*

child she has borne? Though she may forget, I (God) will not forget you! In these challenges days, may we all be reassured that God always remembers us and stands ready to comfort us.

Other passages in the Old Testament also use human mothering language for God. In **Deuteronomy 32:13, 18** we read *ó The Lord set him atop the heights of the land, and fed him with produce of the field; he nursed him with honey from the crags, with oil from flinty rock . . . You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth.*

In **Hosea 11:1-4** we read *ó and this is God speaking, When Israel was a child, I loved him . . . it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms . . . I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.*

Another common image is God as a mother bird sheltering her children under her wings. In Ruth 2:12 we read, *õMay you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.*” This is common imagery in the Psalms too. In Psalm 17 we read, *õKeep me as the apple of your eye; hide me the shadow of your wings.*” In Psalm 57 the psalmist writes, *õI will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed.*” In Psalm 91 we find, *õHe will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge.*”

Jesus picks up the imagery in the New Testament. In both Matthew and Luke we find these words, *õJerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often have I desired to gather your children together as a mother hen gathers her brood under her wings. (Matt. 23:37)*

These images paint God as a protecting and sheltering mother for us. But wait, as they say on late night TV, there’s more. Were your mothers always warm and comforting? Mine was not, and for good reason. Sometimes I needed her to push me, just like I often need God to push

me. Of course, humans are not the only ones that need a push. Mother eagles are known to teach their young ones to fly by deliberately pushing them out of the nest, but then catching them before they plunge dangerously close to the ground. In Deuteronomy 32 we read, “*God guarded Jacob as the apple of his eye, like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over her young, that spreads her wings to catch them and carries them aloft.*”

Scripture shows us that as a mother, God has a fiercely protective side as well. In Hosea 13:8 God says, “*Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack them and rip them open.*” The maternal instinct to protect children can produce wrath as much as warmth, can’t it?

Despite these Scriptures, many of us remain uncomfortable with feminine images of God. Part of the reason may be that God is never addressed directly as “mother” in Scripture. But why is that? Hebrew culture was very patriarchal, so masculine pronouns for God would have been normative for them, but I don’t think their use of male pronouns necessarily meant that they believed God was male. More likely, they were reacting against cults that worshipped Mother Earth over the God who created the universe.ⁱ

Jesus seemed more comfortable with feminine images of God than many of his ancestors. **In Luke 15** he shares three images for God. The first image is the Good Shepherd who leaves his flock and goes looking for the one lost sheep. The third one is the Forgiving Father in the Prodigal Son story. But the second image for God that Jesus gives is that of a woman who loses a coin and then turns the house upside-down looking for it until she finds it. *The Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, the Lost Son.* God is like the Good Shepherd, God is like the Forgiving Father. God is like a woman. Imagine how Jesus’ patriarchal listeners must have reacted to that last statement, It must have challenged their comfort levels.

Jesus used feminine imagery for God in other places too. **In Luke 13** Jesus says, *The Kingdom of God is like a woman who when she bakes uses just a little bit of yeast to effect a whole lot of flour.* (Luke 13:20) God is like a woman baking. **In John 16** Jesus compared our struggles today to a woman in labor, who once the struggles are over experiences the fruit of her labor. He said it like this, *When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world.* (John 16:21) Jesus had a deep appreciation and understanding of motherhood.

You might be surprised to learn that some of the early church fathers also used feminine language for God. In the second century, Clement of Alexandria mixed his metaphors when he described Christians as nursing at the breast of God the Father. Medieval mystic Meister Eckhart described God's activity this way, "What does God do all day long, God gives birth. From eternity God lies on a maternity bed giving birth."ⁱⁱ These two are far from the only ones. Throughout Church history theologians have noted the feminine images for God in the scriptures and have highlighted their importance in our relationship with God. - St. Anselm, St. Jerome, St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Count Zinzendorf, the founder of the Moravian Church - all lifted up the motherhood of God.

Friends, we would do well to do the same - to lift up the motherhood of God, and not just on Mother's Day. Not only because individuals who have negative associations with God as Father or Mother needed expanded imagery for God, but because in too many sectors the church needs to expand its understanding of who can serve and in what capacity. In many conservative Protestant churches, as well as, in Roman Catholic churches, women are not allowed to stand

where I am standing today. But if God encompasses both and/or transcends both genders, then that's not okay. Our young boys and our young girls deserve a more holistic model.

The images for God as a comforting mother, a nursing mother, a nurturing parent bring us comfort in the crazy world. The images of God as an angry protective mother bear and a pushy mother eagle remind us to stand up for those who are threatened and push us to expand our horizons for what is not only possible but life giving. For these images of the motherhood of God, let us all give thanks.

ⁱ Samuel Terrien, *Till the Heart Sings: A Biblical Theology of Manhood and Womanhood*, Eerdmans, 1985, p.60.

ⁱⁱ Lynn Japinga, *Feminism and Christianity: An Essential Guide*: Abingdon, 1999, p. 65.